COMIC SECTION in this Issue
FEBRUARY 25¢
FIGHTING WESTERN
FIGHTING BOB DALE
LARIAT LUCY
LN
130 Pages!
A Super Value!
GUNS PAY OFF
by
ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS
HOT-LEAD HARVEST
by Humphrey Jones

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT PIMPLES

Acne, Blackheads, and other externally caused Skin Blemishes

WHEN pimply skin is your problem, the first thing to get straight is that you *can* and *should* do something about it. To develop the attractiveness of your face is not mere vanity. It is an "open sesame" towards bringing the real YOU closer to other people and giving your personality the poise and confidence it needs. Your good qualities – intelligence, character, dignity – all go to naught... are completely cancelled out by a skin that "nobody loves to touch." Remember, the YOU that people see first is your face.

SKIN PROBLEMS DEMAND IMMEDIATE CARE

Medical statistics tell us that blemished skin usually occurs from adolescence on through adult life. The problem at the adolescent stage is serious enough to deserve attentive care as a family matter. In adulthood, when life's responsibilities are so much weightier, it is doubly important to exert great effort to eliminate these blemishes. And, there is no better time to get pimples under control than *now*.

DON'T ABUSE SKIN

The first instinctive reaction to pimples and blackheads is to squeeze them out with your fingers. A bit of experimentation along these lines soon provides convincing proof that this succeeds only in inflaming your skin and spreading the infection. Under no circumstances should pimples and blackheads ever be squeezed.

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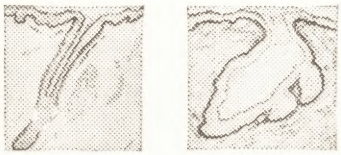
MICROSCOPE SHOWS IMPORTANT BASIS FOR EXTERNALLY CAUSED PIMPLES AND BLACKHEADS

Let's take a look through the microscope to see what's behind those unsightly pimples. The high-powered lenses show your skin coated with a covering which originated from two sources—one, internally and the other, externally.

The internal substances on your skin include dead cells, residue from the sweat glands, and a high quantity of oil excreted by the sebaceous glands. A most important factor in skin disorders occurs when thousands of these tiny sebaceous glands discharge more oil than the skin can use for lubrication. Unless special care is given, the oil forms a heavy film which attracts foreign matter to your skin much as any oil mop picks up dust. These infectious external substances may be classified into three general groups:

1. Airborne materials such as dust, pollens, condensation products of smoke, vapors, etc.
2. Materials brought in contact with the skin, such as tiny fragments of clothing, bedding, cosmetics.
3. Micro-organisms such as bacteria and fungi.

See the difference between a healthy skin and a pimply skin in the microscopic reproductions below.



A. **Normal skin** **B.** **Sick, pimply skin**

Diagram A shows a normal-size, smoothly functioning sebaceous gland. Diagram B pictures sick, pimply skin. Notice that the sebaceous gland is a swollen mass of trapped oil, waste and infectious bacteria.

TRY THIS SENSIBLE WAY

Two sensible aims to achieve in controlling this skin condition are: to clear the pores of clogging matter, and to inhibit the excessive oiliness of the skin. Toward these ends, Dornol Products' research makes available two formulas. One is to aid in thorough cleansing by highly detergent penetration which simplifies the removal of waste and foreign matter. The other is to discourage oiliness with clinically-proved ingredients, and to kill infectious bacteria often associated with externally caused pimples and blackheads.

BLEMISHES COVERED UP

To remove the distressing embarrassment of these skin blemishes, the second Dornol formula exerts a "cover-up" action on your broken out skin while the medication does its work. This, plus its pleasant odor, will spare you the mental distress which is associated with unsightly, malodorous, medicated preparations. Imagine! You can apply this Dornol formula to your skin by day and face the immediate present with greater confidence in your appearance, while secure in the knowledge that medication is acting to remove old blemishes and keep away new ones. What this "cover-up" action alone is worth in peace of mind is beyond calculation. No longer need prying eyes make you wince with humiliation and misery. Now because of this wonderful feature of the Dornol treatment, you can put your best foot forward ... at once!

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED OR DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK

We know what the Dornol treatment has done for others, so we want you to try it at *our risk*. A few minutes a day invested in our treatment can yield more gratifying results than you ever dared hope for. This is what we say to you: If you are not delighted in every way by the improved condition and general appearance of your skin in just 10 days, simply return the unused portion and we will refund not only the price you paid – but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK! Can anything be fairer than that? You have everything to gain ... *and we take all the risk!*

How to get the Dornol Treatment immediately: Just send your name and address to DORNOL PRODUCTS, INC., Dept. 3114, 4257 Katonah Ave, New York 66, N. Y. Be sure to print clearly. By return mail we will ship the Dornol treatment to you in a plain package. When postman delivers the package, pay only $1.98 plus postage. Or, if you wish to save postal fee, send $2 now and we will pay postage. Which ever way you order, the DOUBLE REFUND GUARANTEE still prevails. Don't delay another minute, send for the Dornol Medicated Skin treatment with "cover-up" feature ... ***at once!*** Sorry, no Canadian C.O.D.'s.

YOU PRACTICE Radio Soldering with Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts I send you. Get practical experience mounting and connecting parts.

YOU BUILD this Tester with parts N.R.I. sends early in the course. Soon helps you fix neighbors' Radios and EARN EXTRA MONEY in spare time.

YOU TEST Radio circuits like this built with parts I send. Build special circuits; learn how to locate and repair circuit defects.

YOU BUILD Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.

YOU BUILD this AM Signal Generator for more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

YOU PRACTICE FM (Frequency Modulation) experiments, get more experience with this Superheterodyne Receiver Circuit you build with parts I send.

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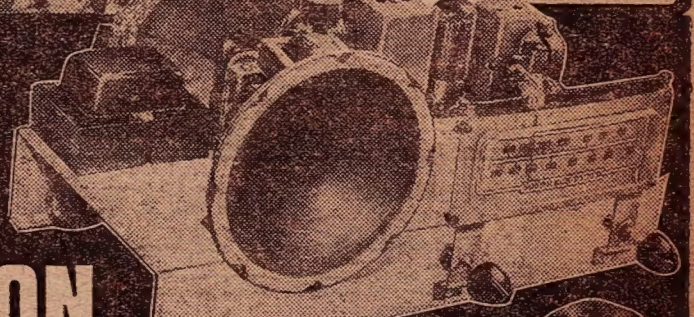
AT HOME IN SPARE TIME



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FIGHTING WESTERN

FEBRUARY, 1950 Vol 5, No. 2

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Do You Make These Mistakes in English?

Sherwin Cody's remarkable invention has enabled more than 100,000 people to correct their mistakes in English. Only 15 minutes a day required to improve your speech and writing.

MANY persons use such expressions as "Leave them lay there" and "Mary was invited as well as myself." Still others say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me." It is astonishing how often "who" is used for "whom" and how frequently we hear such glaring mispronunciations as "for MID able," "ave NOO," and "KEW pon." Few know whether to spell certain words with one or two "c's" or "m's" or "r's" or with "ie" or "ei," and when to use commas in order to make their meaning absolutely clear. Most persons use only common words — colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, monotonous, humdrum.

Why Most People Make Mistakes

What is the reason so many of us are deficient in the use of English and find our careers stunted in consequence? Why is it some cannot spell correctly and others cannot punctuate? Why do so many find themselves at a loss for words to express their meaning adequately? The reason for the deficiency is clear. Sherwin Cody discovered it in scientific tests, which he gave thousands of times. *Most persons do not write and speak good English simply because they never formed the habit of doing so.*

What Cody Did at Gary

The formation of any habit comes only from constant practice. Shakespeare, you may be sure, never studied rules. No one who writes and speaks correctly thinks of *rules* when he is doing so.

Here is our mother-tongue, a language that has built up our civilization, and without which we should all still be muttering savages! Yet some schools, by wrong methods, have made it a study to be avoided—the hardest of tasks instead of the most fascinating of games! For years it has been a crying disgrace.

In that point lies the real difference between Sherwin Cody and these schools! Here is an illustration: Some years ago Mr. Cody

SHERWIN CODY

was invited by the author of the famous Gary System of Education to teach English to all upper-grade pupils in Gary, Indiana. By means of unique practice exercises, *Mr. Cody secured more improvement in these pupils in five weeks than previously had been obtained by similar pupils in two years under old methods.* There was no guesswork about these results. They were proved by scientific comparisons. Amazing as this improvement was, more interesting still was the fact that the children were "wild" about the study. It was like playing a game!

The basic principle of Mr. Cody's new method is habit-forming. Anyone can learn to write and speak correctly by constantly using the correct forms. But how is one to know in each case what is correct? Mr. Cody solves this problem in a simple, unique, sensible way.

100% Self-Correcting Device

Suppose he himself were standing forever at your elbow. Every time you mispronounced or misspelled a word, every time you violated correct grammatical usage, every time you used the wrong word to express what you meant, suppose you could hear him whisper: "That is wrong, it should be thus and so." In a short time you would habitually use the correct form and the right words in speaking and writing.

If you continued to make the same mistakes over and over again, each time patiently he would tell you what was right. He would, as it were, be an everlasting mentor beside you—a mentor who would not laugh at you but who would, on the contrary, support and help you. The 100% Self-Correcting Device does exactly this thing. It is Mr. Cody's silent voice behind you, ready to speak out whenever you commit an error. It finds your mistakes and concentrates on them. You do not need to study anything you already know. There are no rules to memorize.

FREE—Book on English

It is impossible, in this brief review, to give more than a suggestion of the range of subjects covered by Mr. Cody's new method and of what his practice exercises consist. But those who are interested can find a detailed description in a fascinating little book called "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day." This book is published by the Sherwin Cody Course in English in Rochester. It can be had free, upon request. There is no obligation involved in writing for it. The book is more than a prospectus. Unquestionably it tells one of the most interesting stories about education in English ever written.

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NOW that the chores are done and the cattle have bedded down for the night, we can set back and rest a spell before climbing into our soogans. So let's take off our Justins, twist up a quirly, and have a look at the mail.

First off there's a letter from Ralph Dixon, of Cleveland, Ohio, who's curious about a favorite Western dish.

"I've just finished the December issue of Fighting Western, and thought I would let you know that I enjoyed the Ramrod's Corner very much. I've been reading F. W. for several years and have often wished there was a readers' page. I'm hoping you can tell me what a son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack is. I've run across this several times in stories, but nobody ever takes time to describe it."

Well, Ralph, a son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack was something which the cowhands considered quite a treat. It was made of dried fruit and rolled in dough. Then it was sewed in a sack and steamed. The cow country cooks claimed that to make it you had to have a lot of patience and do plenty of cussing. For it had to be hung in a big bucket of hot water over a pot rack to steam. If you could see one of them made, Ralph, you'd agree that the name fits.

From Salt Lake City, Utah, comes Vic Holland, who has a few compliments to hand out.

"Fighting Western is a big two-bits worth to me and I'm always looking forward to the next issue. I like it because all the stories are complete and it isn't cluttered up with a lot of fact articles. Just eight or nine good red-blooded stories that do what I think any first-rate fiction magazine should—entertain. Keep up the good work and I'll stay with you."

Thanks a lot, Vic, and we'll sure keep trying to make each issue of Fighting Western just a little better than the last.

Next comes Amos Webb, of Tampa, Florida, who has something to say about river boats in the early days.

"Since starting to read F. W. I've become quite a Western history fan, and I'm building a library that will cover the western development from the mountain men on down. I like best the period dealing with steamboat navigation on the Missouri, and I would like to see some stories in F. W. laid against this colorful background.

"The first steamboat to make the run up the Missouri was the Independence, which pulled out of St. Louis on May 21, 1819. For the next twenty years, the steamboat was used mostly in the fur trade, freighting supplies up the river and coming back loaded with pelts and hides. The rush to the gold fields started in 1849, and the steamboat business began to boom. Larger boats were built, the average being about two hundred and fifty feet long, with a forty foot beam and a six foot deep hold. There was room for close to four hundred passengers. In addition they could carry about seven hundred tons of freight. The boats had flat bottoms and drew only three or four feet of water. The boilers and machinery were on the main deck. The great paddle wheels were powered by two smooth-running engines. Above the main deck was the saloon deck, where the cabins were located. Next came the hurricane deck, which was often used for overflow cargo. Here was located the "texas," a cabin for the boat's officers. Surmounting all was the pilot house, with glass windows on all sides.

"The pilot threw the biggest shadow

(Continued on page 118)

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $3,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

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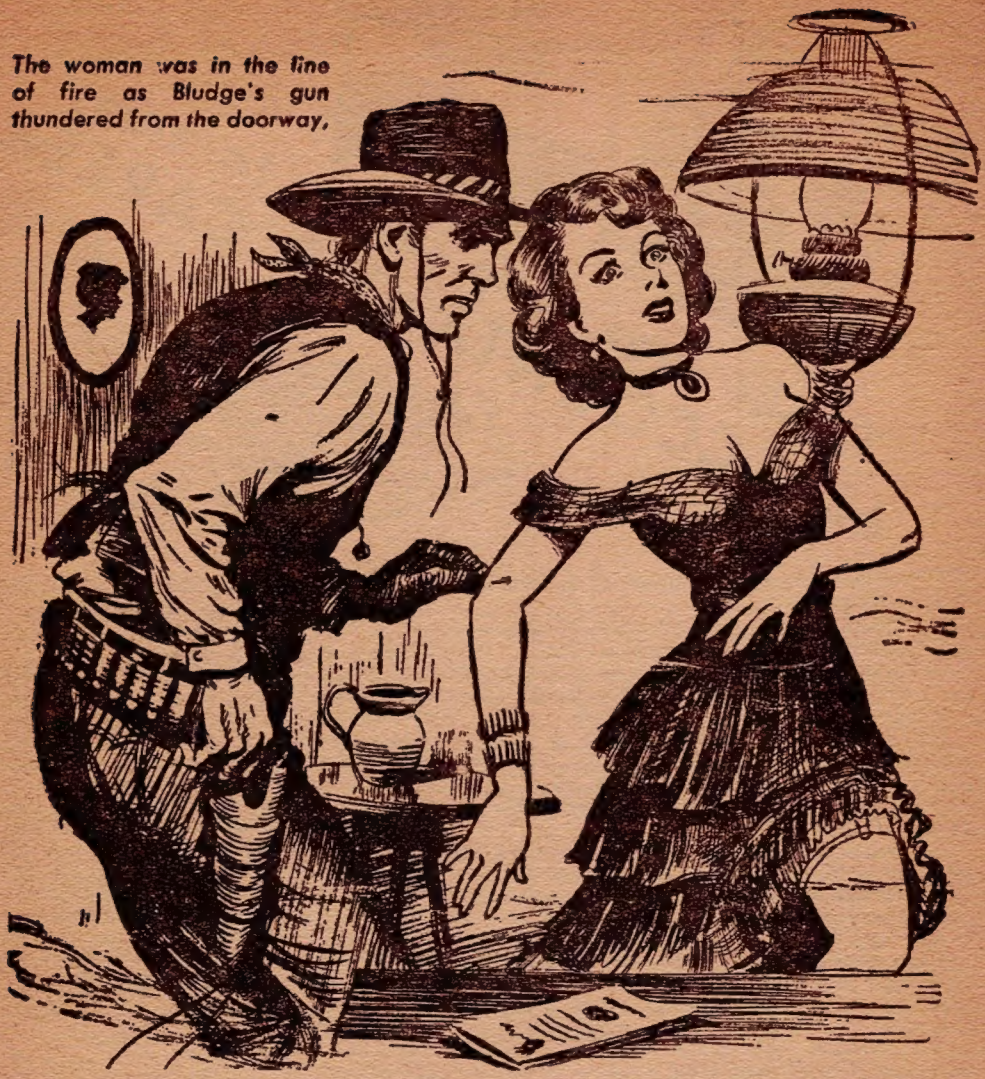

The woman was in the line of fire as Bludge's gun thundered from the doorway.

GUNS PAY OFF

RIDING south from the brawling silver-mining town of Dominion along a twisting mountain road, Joel Burton thought he heard in the darkness ahead of him the click of a horseshoe striking stone. On this road at night almost anything might be met, from a porcupine to a grizzly bear, from a footpad trying to slug and rob the unwary traveler to a skulking Apache brave trying to exact vengeance from the hated white man who had taken this silver-mining area from the tribal hunting grounds of his people. Pulling his horse to a halt, Joel Burton sat listening. The night was quiet. To his left was a fifty-foot drop into Eldorado Creek. To his right was the face of a cliff. Ahead of him was—darkness.

A big man and a miner, Burton sat his saddle stiffly. The fret of many problems moved in him, the problem of this sound

The silver mine was supposed to have petered out, and then, strangely, the partners who owned it were dry-gulched, one by one, by a sinister neighbor who had his own reasons to filch the property.

By
ROBERT
MOORE
WILLIAMS

Illustrated by
Robert McCarty

he thought he had heard, the problem of the Renegade mine in which he and his three partners owned the controlling interest, the problem of decreasing production in the mine, the problem of securing capital to run an exploratory shaft to greater depth to see if silver in paying quantities could be located, and the problem of Cotty Bludge, who squatted like a

greedy giant across the whole silver-mining country. In the early days of development at the Renegade, Bludge had bought forty per cent of the stock in the mine, and Joel Burton had just come from asking Bludge to advance additional capital to put down an exploratory shaft —which request Bludge had profanely refused—bluntly, turned him down, flat and cold.

"If you think I'm going to send good money after bad, you're crazy," Bludge had told him. "My advice to you and your partners is to try to find some sucker and sell out to him. As a silver mine, the Renegade is finished. But, as a favor to you, to help you out, I'll give you a hundred dollars for your stock in the mine."

"No, thanks, Cotty," Burton had answered. He had taken his stock certificate to the bank and had tried to borrow money on it— and had been turned down. The banker, the whole town of Dominion, was uneasy. The silver ore in the area was playing out. Unless new deposits were located, Dominion would become another ghost town. And Joel Burton, Ed Langor, Russ Holder, and young Bill Wesco, the latter now back in town seeing his best girl, would become prospectors again, ragged, hungry, wasteland wanderers, diggers of holes in the ground.

Burton shook his head. It was not a pleasant prospect. He clucked to his horse. The sound he thought he had heard was not repeated. But, because he was wary and uneasy, as he rode forward he drew his gun.

His horse lifted its ears and snorted. Alarmed, he leaned forward in the saddle searching for something that lurked in the darkness.

The rope come from behind him. A split second before it landed, he heard it swish through the air. Jabbing his heels into the flank of his horse, he ducked down in the saddle. The rope settled over his shoulders and was jerked tight. He snatched at it with his left hand, trying to throw it from him. At the same time, he tried to twist around in his saddle and shoot back along the line of the rope.

He was a split second too late. His horse lunged forward. The rope was jerked hard He was yanked out of the saddle. As he spun through the air, he pulled the trigger of the gun—a wild shot that sent echoes ringing through the mountains. Then he hit the ground with a bone-breaking, mind-dazing thud. Stars spun before his eyes.

DAZED, barely conscious, he tried to get to his feet. Somewhere in the darkness a voice shouted. Footsteps pounded toward him He felt himself grabbed. He tried to strike at his attackers He was too weak. Hands went through his pockets. What the hell were they searching him for—he didn't have anything of value!

"Git that stock!" a hoarse voice yelled.

His certificate for fifteen hundred shares of stock in the Renegade—fifteen per cent of the total issue—he had that. But, so far as he knew, it wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. He felt the certificate yanked from his pocket.

"Got it, Kas." A match flared. "Yep, this is it," Kas spoke. Satisfaction sounded in the voice.

Fingers were still running through Burton's pockets. "He's got a little money, Kas," a voice said.

All right, he thought. Let them take the few quarters he had. Let them take the stock. What difference did it make?

"Leave the money alone!" Kas ordered.

"Leave it?" The first voice sounded startled.

"Hell, yes!" Kas answered. "Then, when he's found, it'll look like robbery wasn't the motive. Pick him up, boys, and dump him over the edge so it'll look like his horse shied!"

Dimly, Burton heard the words. As his mind translated their meaning, he realized what was going to happen. Desperately he tried to struggle, to break free.

Hands lifted him, carried him, threw him.

The night seemed to revolve around him as he went down. He got one glimpse of stars and a moon in the sky, then he hit with a splintering crash on the rocks below and the lights in the sky abruptly went out.

HEADING home to the Renegade mine, Bill Wesco hummed a little song as he rode through the quiet night. He had just kissed Sunny goodbye. This was enough to make any man hum, or shout or sing, for that matter. Sunshiny Morning Jones was her real name, her mother had named her after the brightness of the new day on which she was born. Sunny was his best girl. His only girl, in fact. He felt he was a mighty lucky man. As soon as they struck it rich at the Renegade, he was going to ask Sunny to marry him

That would be tomorrow—no, he estimated regretfully, it would not be tomorrow. But he was certain it would be in two or three months at the most, just as soon as they had sunk a deep shaft and struck it rich. Joel Burton had already gone to borrow the money they would need to sink the deep shaft. Of course, Joel would get the money. Joel always got everything that any of the partners needed. Bill Wesco firmly believed that Joel Burton—or Ed Langor or Russ Holder, if Joel wasn't around—could do anything.

Coming west as a runaway kid at the age of nineteen, Bill had fallen in with these three men. Lonely men themselves, they had recognized the loneliness in him and they had taken him in, first as a helper, then when he showed the stuff in him they had adopted him as a full partner. For four years he had worked side by side with them, sharing good luck and bad. He had been with them when the prospect hole they had been digging had turned into the Renegade mine Overnight, the vein had looked rich enough to make fortunes for them all. But after a year of development, the silver had begun to play out. This had been bad luck. They had accepted it as they had accepted the good, equal partners in fortune or misfortune.

Taking in Bill Wesco, they had taught him all they knew about prospecting, mining, and life in the western country. Joel Burton had taught him how to hold a hard-rock drill and how to swing a sledge so that the hole was driven true and fast. Ed Langor, always scared but always doing his job, had taught him how to tamp the powder in the hole, how to fit and cut the fuse and how to light it. Tough old Russ Holder had taught him other things, mostly how to use a gun. He suspected that sometime in his past Russ had been a gunman but he had asked no questions and Russ had volunteered no information. One thing was certain, Russ knew how to shoot.

Thinking of Sunny, Bill rode slowly through the quiet night. Overhead were stars and a lop-sided moon. To the left the water of Eldorado creek splashed softly. Up from the mysterious southland, a warm breeze was blowing. His horse lifted alert ears and snorted softly.

Wolf? he thought. Bear, maybe. Panther? Who knew what a horse smelled or heard? What difference did it make? Sunny had kissed him goodbye! That was the important thing.

"Heeellllppp"— The sound coming on the wind was more of a moan than a cry. Hearing it, Bill Wesco was not certain it came from a human throat. There were odd overtones in it that sent chills up his back. He had heard stories of how panthers sometimes emitted a wail exactly like the sound of a crying baby. Was this a panther? He pulled his horse to a halt.

"Eeeellpp!" This time there was no mistaking the cry. It was a call for help. Bill Wesco swung from his horse Once more the cry came and he located the source as being in Eldorado Creek canyon.

Fifteen minutes later, by the light from a match, he was looking at the man he had thought could do anything—Joel Burton.

"Joel. Let me help you."

"No. Don't touch me."

With broken bones grating in tortured flesh, Joel Burton did not wish to be moved.

"What happened, Joel? Did your horse throw you?"

"No. I was roped from my horse—and thrown here. Bill, a man called Kas did it. Kas—got my stock. That's what he wanted—the stock. Look—look out for Kas, Bill. Look—" The whisper went into silence. Joel Burton moaned softly, his body jerked, then was still.

Bill Wesco hastily struck another match. By its flaring light, he saw that Joel Burton was dead.

The knowledge was like a blow in the belly, like a fist that hits and knocks the life out of a man, leaving him desperately sick inside.

Gathering the body in his arms, Bill Wesco began the steep ascent from Eldorado creek.

IN THE rough shack that served as a bunkhouse, at noon, the three men sat in silence. They had just returned from burying Joel Burton on top of the hill above the mine. Joel had loved this spot. From it, it was possible to look across long ranges of mountains. Joel Burton rested there forever. In the bunkhouse, lean Russ Holder asked the same question for the ninth time. "You're dead certain he said, 'Kas'?"

For the ninth time Bill Wesco answered. "I'm dead certain."

"And you're certain he said this Kas was after the stock?"

"Yes."

"I don't get it," Russ Holder said. "Between the four of us, we own sixty per cent of the stock in the Renegade, each of us owning fifteen per cent. Cotty Bludge owns the remaining forty per cent. What I don't see is what good fifteen per cent of the stock would be to anybody."

"Especially in a mine that's petered out," Ed Langor said. "It don't make sense any way you look at it." His eyes came accusingly up to Bill Wesco. "You must have misunderstood Joel. Likely he was raving, out of his head, and you didn't hear him right."

Bill Wesco shrugged. From the minute he carried Joel Burton into this bunkhouse and told his story, Russ Holder and Ed Langor had thought he was mistaken. They still thought it. "But he didn't have the stock," he pointed out.

"He might have left it in Dominion," Ed Langor answered. "He was going to try to raise money on it, you know. If he made a loan, he'd have to leave the stock as security. Maybe he even sold the stock."

"I don't believe he'd do that," Bill Wesco answered. "We agreed that none of us would sell his stock without the consent of the others. Joel wouldn't sell his stock without telling us." Wesco's voice was puzzled.

"That's right," Russ Holder spoke. "But—what did he do with it?"

"I got a hunch that if we just sit tight for a few days we'll find out what happened to it," Bill Wesco answered. "One thing is certain—if Joel was killed for it, then we can be mighty danged certain that it's valuable."

"But we know it ain't valuable," Ed Langor patiently repeated. "It's stock in *our* mine. We know our own mine."

"I know that. But—" Bill shrugged again. Something that had happened kept coming back to him. At the time it had happened, he hadn't understood it but now it kept coming back to him like a persistent buzzfly that will not go away.

"You've got something on your mind," Russ Holder spoke.

"It's not much," Bill said. "Just something that happened last night. It ain't important, so far as I can see, and I don't know whether I ought to tell it or not. It was said to me in confidence."

"If it has anything to do with Joel, you've got to tell it," Holder spoke.

"That's just it. I can't see how it has anything to do with Joel directly, but

As the rope swished through the air and settled around Burton's shoulders, he grabbed it, but he was too late.

indirectly it may have a lot to do with him."

"Tell it and let us decide," Holder spoke.

"Okay," Bill said. If Russ Holder said it was all right, then it was all right. "You know, I was seeing a girl last night."

"We know," Holder said, his voice suddenly gentle. "What about her?"

"Well, it was something her dad said to me. You know, he's a miner. He asked me if I owned any stock in the Renegade. I told him I did. He said for me to hang on to it tighter than I would to a million dollars."

"Did he say why?" Holder spoke.

"He wouldn't say another darned thing except that he made me promise I wouldn't ever tell a single living soul what he had told me. He seemed scared half to death that he had told me that much. He wouldn't explain what he had said, in fact he wouldn't even talk about it any more. I was going to ask him more about it but Sunny came in just then and I kind of forgot——"

"I see," Russ Holder said. "Sunny came in and you forgot about a million dollars," he grinned. "That's okay, Bill. If I was in your shoes, I'd forget a million dollars when Sunny was around too. But——" Holder looked at Ed Langor and the two men exchanged glances.

"Of course, Sunny's dad works in the prospect shaft they're putting down at the Lucky Devil mine—"

"And of course the Lucky Devil mine just happens to be the nearest mine to the Renegade, and of course any ore discovered in the deep shaft at the Lucky Devil is almost a dead cinch to be found in the Renegade if we go deep enough!" Russ Holder's fist banged on the table top. "It's possible we're sitting right on top of a fortune and don't know it. What was the ore they found in the Lucky Devil, Bill?" Russ Holder had become wildly excited.

"Sunny's dad didn't tell me," Bill answered. "I think he was sorry he had said as much as he had."

"And I don't blame him," Holder said. "If he let slip a secret that the owners of the Lucky Devil want kept, he might get himself killed. Ed, who owns the Lucky Devil?"

"Somebody by the name of Haldane Sherman, a speculator from New York, owns a big chunk of it. I've also heard that Cotty Bludge owns a piece of it and I know for certain that Cotty acts as local agent for Haldane Sherman. But we don't know that anything has been found in the shaft at the Lucky Devil. We're only guessing—"

"We don't know anything for certain," Russ Holder answered. "But thanks to Bill here we know enough now to try to find out the rest. And that's just exactly what we're going to do!" Bang! went Holder's fist on the table top. "I'm going to find out what's at the bottom of the prospect shaft at the Lucky Devil. Then I'm going to look for a man named Kas!"

"Russ!" Ed Langor spoke quickly. Fear sounded in his voice. "You stay away from the Lucky Devil. You know who you're monkeying with there." "I know," Russ Holder answered. For a moment his face looked grim. Something of fear showed on it.

"If they have found something in the Lucky Devil, you know it's going to be well guarded. And the man you will have to buck to get at it will be—Cotty Bludge."

ED LANGOR'S voice dropped to a whisper, as if he was speaking of the devil himself, and he looked nervously over his shoulder like he was afraid somebody might be listening to him.

Listening, Bill Wesco saw the fear in the face of the older man, heard it in his voice. Two things on earth Ed Langor was scared of—blasting powder and Cotty Bludge. And with good reason. Big physically, big financially, Cotty Bludge was a speculator in mines—and in sure things. Bill Wesco had seen Bludge many times, a six-foot, two hundred and fifty-pound giant, striding along the streets of Dominion as if he owned the town. He knew the tales told about the man, how Bludge had closed the Tomboy mine, forcing the minority stockholders to sell out to him for a fraction of the real value of the property, how Bludge had gained control of the stamp mill in which ore from many small mines was worked and had boosted the price charged for reducing ore, with the result that the small operators had been forced out of business. Then Bludge, acting through agents, had stepped in and bought the small mines. There were other tales too, tales that Cotty Bludge would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

Knowing these things, Bill Wesco knew why Russ Holder hesitated.

"We gotta be careful," Ed Langor urged. "There's something going on here that we don't know about. We better be mighty cautious until we know exactly where we stand."

Russ Holder thought about the situation and made up his mind. "To hell with

it," he said. "If I've got to buck Cotty Bludge, then I've got to buck him and that's all there is to it. Joel Burton is dead. I'm going to town."

Moving to the wall, he took from a nail the gun belt and holster hanging there. Methodically he checked the cylinders of the gun, to make certain it was fully loaded. Bill Wesco rose to his feet. "I'll ride with you," he said.

Ed Langor stared at them as if they had both gone crazy. Russ Holder moved to the door, opened it, started out, stopped. Looking over his shoulder, Bill Wesco saw why Russ had stopped.

Five armed men were riding up to the building. The one in the lead Bill recognized as Billy Caswell. At the sight of the approaching men, a shock of surprise passed through him. Billy Caswell worked for only one man—Cotty Bludge.

The agent for Cotty Bludge, and four armed men with him, were here at the Renegade mine.

FROM inside the bunkhouse, Bill Wesco watched the meeting. At the sight of the five men, Russ Holder had snorted and had stepped right out to meet them like an enraged bulldog charging strange dogs intruding on its property. Ed Langor had hastened out too, to try to keep peace, Bill suspected. He had remained behind. As soon as Langor was out of the door, he took from the antlers over the fireplace the ten-gauge shotgun resting there. On the mantel was a box of shells. Loading the gun, Bill Wesco kept out of sight and moved quietly to the window. Outside leather creaked as the five men drew rein.

"I've got some bad news for you," Caswell's voice came.

"Bad news?" Russ spoke. "What's that?"

"As of right now, the Renegade is closed down. Lock, stock, and barrel, the whole shebang is shut down." Caswell rolled the words around his tongue as if he relished the sound of them.

"What?" Russ Holder's voice was sharp and hard. "You've got the infernal gall to tell me to get off of my own property?"

"You and your partners have got until sundown to git off the premises," Caswell answered. "If you don't like it, you can lump it—*Git him, men!*" As Caswell's voice rose, Ed Langor cried out sharply.

As clearly as if he had been able to see through the wall, the voices told Bill Wesco what was happening outside. Russ Holder had lost his hair-trigger temper and had gone for his gun. Ed Langor had tried to grab him. Bill Wesco also knew what was going to happen next—unless he stopped it. Caswell had brought four men with him for only one reason. Bill jumped to the window.

Outside Russ was struggling with Ed Langor and was trying to get his gun free. Five rifles were swinging to cover the struggling pair. A rifle roared.

The shot was hasty and it missed. Before the rifle could be carefully aimed Bill Wesco had his head—and the shotgun—out the window.

"Drop them guns!" he yelled. "I'll let daylight through the whole bunch of you!"

Startled faces turned toward him, startled eyes saw him—and the shotgun. A man trying to cover five men with a sixgun would have invited a barrage of hot lead. But a shotgun is a darned inclusive weapon and nobody in his right senses starts an argument with a man holding a shotgun cocked and ready to let go. The five men saw those twin barrels staring at them. All movement instantly stopped. Caswell's mouth hung open.

"I'll get you for sure," Bill Wesco said. "Lower the hammer on your rifle and drop it down the side of your horse."

Five rifles went gently to the ground. Two of the men wore sixguns. The handguns went down too. Ed Langor and Russ Holder stopped wrestling. They stared in stunned silence at Bill Wesco. He looked at Caswell.

"I was jist carrying out orders," Caswell hastily said.

"Whose orders?"

"Why—Cotty's!" Caswell seemed surprised. "He told me he had bought control in the Renegade and for me to get together some boys and come out here and close the mine down. That's all I know about it."

"Where'd he get control?"

"Why—he didn't say."

"And you didn't ask him?"

"Hell, no!" Caswell blurted out. "You don't ask Cotty things like that. He jist old me to take charge of the property—"

"Okay," Bill Wesco said. Sliding his legs over the windowsill, he stepped outside. Up on the side of the slope was a wooden shack. Empty now, it had been used for the storage of blasting powder. "You can take charge of part of it—that powder house up there. Slide down and start walking."

THE five men moved slowly and with reluctance toward the empty shack. They didn't like a little bit what was happening but they liked even less the sight of the shotgun Bill Wesco was carrying. He herded them into the wooden shack and dropped the bar into place. Ed Langor and Russ Holder had followed him up the hill. He handed the shotgun to Langor. "Ed, do you think you can ride herd on these hombres until me and Russ get back?"

"Sure." The dazed Langor took the gun. "But where are you and Russ going?"

"Why," Bill Wasco said, astonished. "I thought we had already settled that. We're going to talk to Cotty."

"Talk to Cotty! There wasn't anything said about talking to him!"

"Wasn't there? Well, there has been now. Hasn't there, Russ?"

Russ Holder's lined face was a bleak granite mask. "I'll say there has!" he answered.

In the late afternoon, the heat lay like a smothering blanket over Dominion. Starting from the banks of Eldorado creek, the town crawled up the steep hills on both sides of the stream. Main street was a winding thoroughfare that followed the crooked course of the creek. With the discovery of silver, Dominion had sprung up like mushrooms after a spring rain, with saloons, stores, and houses sprawling in all directions. On the hillsides around the town were mine shafts, with piles of raw rock sliding down from them. At the edge of the town was the stamp mill where the silver ore was crushed and the concentrates recovered. There was no railroad to this town, visitors arriving on horseback or by stage coach. Freight came in and silver concentrates went out by heavy wagons.

In this town almost anything might be met, from an Apache with a scalping knife tucked under his blanket, to a suave, well-dressed eastern speculator, with a stack of mine options in his pocket. Engineers, hard-rock miners, prospectors, cowboys trying a turn at mining, Cousin Jack miners straight from Cornwall, gamblers and their women, honest men and crooks, all were here.

Fights were common, life was worth little. Every man wore a gun in a holster at his hip or carried one handy in his pocket. The law was represented by a town marshal; new marshals were hired every month. The calling of "lawman" was a mighty unhealthy one.

Dominion had been and still was a boom town. But there were rumors that the metal on which its prosperity was founded was playing out. Around the town some of the mines had already closed. If the silver played out, Dominion would become another ghost city.

In Dominion, the biggest building was the Regal Hotel. All important visitors stopped at the Regal. In it, Cotty Bludge maintained both offices and living quarters. He also owned the hotel.

To this hotel in the heat of the late afternoon came Russ Holder and Bill Wesco. Tying their horses in front, they went through the thronged lobby. "We'll

"I'll take it from here!" yelled Bill Wesco as his gun roared.

go right on up to Cotty's office," Russ said. "We'll walk right in to see him."

"He'll have a clerk in his waiting room," Bill Wesco said.

"I know," Holder answered. They entered the waiting room. The clerk was there all right, a man neither knew, a short, squat individual with a scar running down the side of his face. Scar-face glanced at his two visitors. To him, they looked like a couple of busted miners coming to beg the boss for a handout. "Whatcha want!" Scar-face said.

"To see Cotty," Russ Holder answered.

"Got an appointment?"

"Nope."

Scar-face shook his head. "Can't see him then." He spat into the spittoon beside his desk.

"Is he in?"

"Yeah, but he's busy. Can't see him without an appointment."

"Good," Russ Holder said, grinning. "We've got an appointment. This is it." From his hip, he swept the holstered gun. "Get up and walk ahead of us. You can announce us to the great man."

Scar-face, his eyes fixed on the muzzle of the gun, hastily rose and crossed the room. He opened the door into Bludge's private office. "Two gents to see you."

From behind a heavy desk, in a richly furnished room, Cotty Bludge looked up frowning. He saw Russ Holder and the gun. The frown froze on his face.

Russ looked into the office. Hastily he dropped the muzzle of the gun and began to fumble for his hat. Behind him, Bill did the same. Things were not as they expected to find them.

COTTY BLUDGE was not alone. Seated beside him at the desk was the most beautiful woman Bill Wesco had ever seen. She was not frightened by the way they had burst into the room. She was not even worried. She smiled at them.

In the presence of a woman Russ Holder was helpless. "Beg pardon, m'am—" He fumbled the gun back into his holster.

Behind the desk, the startled frown left Bludge's face. He began to grin. "Husker," he spoke to Scar-face, "go back to your desk. Gentlemen, come in." Beaming with cordiality, he came around the desk. "Russ Holder, you old horse thief, it's good to see you. Bill Wesco, it's good to see you too." Bill Wesco, feeling like a schoolboy, found himself shaking hands with Cotty Bludge. Bill was embarrassed. He didn't know what to do. He looked to Russ for guidance but Russ didn't seem to know what to do either. The presence of a woman stopped them cold. Cotty Bludge turned to her.

"Miss Sherman, I would like you to meet two friends of mine, Russ Holder and Bill Wesco." Bludge had a manner about him. Somehow or other, he had taken complete control of this situation. From Miss Sherman, each got a nod and a pleasant smile.

"As a matter of fact," Bludge continued. "I'm very glad you gentlemen dropped in. Miss Sherman and I were just talking about you."

"Talking about us?" Russ Holder gasped.

"Yes," Bludge answered. His tone was warm and confidential. He spoke as if he was divulging a great secret. "As you no doubt know, Miss Caroline Sherman is the principal stockholder in the property adjoining the Renegade—the Lucky Devil mine."

"No!" Russ Holder did not seem able to believe his ears. A woman owning a mine! It was inconceivable. "We thought —at least we heard—"

Bludge nodded. "You heard the property was owned by Mr. Haldane Sherman. It happens, however, that Mr. Sherman has recently passed away. Miss Sherman is his daughter and she inherited his holdings in the Lucky Devil and in other property he owned in this vicinity. Surely you saw this in the papers."

"We don't see many papers," Russ Holder apologized.

Bludge nodded as if he quite well understood how it was with people who made their living by digging holes in the ground. "The important thing is that Miss Sherman, inheriting her father's holdings, is a very rich woman. And she has decided to manage the properties herself."

His voice said that a woman in business, especially in the mining business, was a joke—though not a joke at which gentlemen could laugh. On the contrary, it was the duty of every gentleman to do everything in his power to help so

lovely a woman make a success of this enterprise. Bludge beamed at them. "Now here is where you come in. Since Miss Sherman wishes to undertake large-scale development at the Lucky Devil, she naturally wishes to control the adjoining property. She has just come to me with an offer to buy the total outstanding stock of the Renegade."

IF HE had tossed a can of powder, with a lighted fuse attached, into the room, he would not have produced a greater effect. Russ Holder did not seem to know what to say. Cotty Bludge beamed at them. Miss Sherman smiled faintly. It was Bill Wesco who broke the silence.

"How long have you known she wanted to buy the Renegade?"

Bludge glanced at him, a single hard look, then the big man chuckled. "If I were in your position, I would ask the same question, or at least *think* it." From his pocket he took a watch. "I have known Miss Sherman was interested in the Renegade for less than an hour. Isn't that right, my dear?"

"Quite right," Miss Sherman said, smiling.

"Does she know the mine is worthless?" Bill continued.

A frown began to gather on the big man's face. "Naturally I have not attempted to deceive her as to the value of the property. Have I, my dear?"

The violet eyes studied Bill Wesco. "Mr. Bludge has even told me that he has decided to close the mine and abandon it as worthless."

"Ah. Then he has told you that he controls the mine?"

Miss Sherman's violet eyes turned quickly to Cotty Bludge as if she was seeking an answer to this question.

"Naturally I have told her I own the controlling interest," Bludge rumbled. "I have even made tentative plans to sell my stock to her. However, she also wishes to buy the stock of the minority stockholders as well as mine. This, of course, you and your partners must decide for yourselves, but if you want my advice, you will sell. As the property stands now, it is worth very little."

"There is a chance that a deep prospect shaft might uncover something."

"Certainly there is," Bludge answered. "But it will cost close to a hundred thousand dollars to sink that shaft. Have you got that kind of money or can you get it?"

"Naturally we don't have that much money. But if we do the work ourselves, the cost will be much less," Bill Wesco said.

"Then you're gambling," Bludge answered. "And you're also forgetting one thing—that I own controlling interest in the Renegade and that no development can be undertaken without my consent." Bludge pounded on his desk. "I own fifty-five per cent of the stock in this mine and that makes me boss."

"That fifty-five per cent includes Joel Burton's stock?" Bill Wesco asked.

"Of course—" For a split second Bludge paused in mid-sentence as if he had suddenly thought of something, then went quickly on. "—It includes the stock I bought from Burton." His gaze concentrated on Bill Wesco and Bill watched the hot anger in the big man's eyes change into cold calculation. "Didn't he tell you that he sold me his stock?" Bludge went on.

"No, he didn't," Bill Wesco said. "He didn't mention a thing about it." As an afterthought, he added. "I guess it must have slipped his mind."

BLUDGE sat very still, his cold gaze digging into Bill Wesco. "I guess it slipped Caswell's mind too, when he came out today to throw us off the property."

For a moment, Bludge looked as if he was going to choke. "Caswell did what?" he shouted. Bill told him what had happened.

"I told Caswell to go out there and tell you people that I had bought con-

trol of the mine, that I was going to close it, and for you to come in and see me if you wanted to sell your stock too, but I didn't tell him to go out there with a lot of armed men and start trouble. Wait'll I get hold of Billy Caswell, I'll skin him alive! Gentlemen, I'm very sorry this happened." Getting to his feet, Bludge came around the desk and apologized.

Russ Holder said it was all right. Bill Wesco grinned. Bludge apologized again for the actions of Caswell.

"There's one thing I don't understand," Bill Wesco said.

"What's that?" Bludge said. His manner was genial, the tone of his voice said that any little point that wasn't clear he would be glad to explain. It was just a little too oily.

"What I don't understand is how Joel Burton could have sold you the stock yesterday and still have told me, as he died last night, that it had been stolen from him!"

The room got very still. Miss Sherman turned amazed violent eyes toward Bludge. In the silence Russ Holder cleared his throat. "By God, that's right, Bill. He's admitted he has got the stock and he is lying about the way he got it."

"Gentlemen—" Bludge shouted.

"Gentlemen, hell!" Russ Holder shouted. He had finally forgotten the presence of a woman in the room. "You're trying to slick us and you've been caught at it."

"Just because this damned fool kid hasn't got good sense, don't lose your head!" Bludge shouted. "I don't know what happened but I know I bought that stock from Joel Burton. Anything else is a lie."

"Yeah and you've told it. I think you got that stock last night, from the man who killed Joe. I think you want control of the Renegade because you've struck it rich at the Lucky Devil. I know you, Cotty Bludge, I know you as both a liar and a killer."

Russ Holder's hair-trigger temper had finally broken its bounds. He was speaking his mind.

Cotty Bludge turned a startled face toward him. Bludge opened his mouth to answer—and shouted a single word. "Husker!"

Behind Russ Holder and Bill Wesco the door was snatched open. A voice said, "Get 'em up, gents." Turning, Bill Wesco saw Scar-face standing in the open door In each hand, Scar-face held a gun. "This time the shoe is on the other foot, gents. Jist be mighty careful if you want to keep on living."

Without taking his eyes from them, he spoke to his boss. "Whatta you want me to do with them?"

"Throw 'em out of here!" the voice of Cotty Bludge came, shouting an answer.

WHEN Russ Holder and Bill Wesco emerged from the Regal Hotel, the sun had dropped low in the west and the street was cool with grateful shadow. A soft wind was blowing across the town, bringing with it the tangy odors of far-off deserts and mountains. Russ Holder wiped sweat from his lined face. "I made a mistake, Bill. I ought never to have spoke to Cotty Bludge like that. But that woman got me all upset. Because she was there, I kept still until I almost busted. Then when I did start, I said too much."

"You told the truth," Bill Wesco protested.

"That's just the trouble. If I was wrong, Bludge will shrug it off. But if I was telling the truth, or even getting close to the truth, then we had better make peace talk or war medicine—fast. If he had Joel Burton killed, he did it to get control of the Renegade. If control of the Renegade is important enough to justify killing one man, it's important enough to justify killing two."

Russ Holder sounded desperately in earnest. "He won't have anybody killed for a day or two anyhow," Bill Wesco said. "His hatchet gang is all locked up

As the bullets struck him, Bludge fell backwards and crashed down the stairs.

in the powder house. And he don't know it—yet."

"By golly, that's so." Something of relief sounded in Holder's voice. "Right now Bludge ain't got any killers to help him."

"But Miss Sherman owns the Lucky Devil," Bill pointed out. "She is the one who wants to buy the Renegade, not Bludge. He is willing to sell his Renegade stock to her, or he said he was. He even advised us to sell to her. If he sells his stock to her, even if they've struck solid gold in that prospect shaft at the Lucky Devil, she is the one who will make the profit, not Bludge." He mulled the

problem over in his mind, trying to make heads or tails of it. So far as he could see, it had no solution. "Maybe I did misunderstand Joel last night," he blurted out. "Maybe Bludge did buy Joel's stock, just as he claims he did. Maybe he did send Caswell out to tell us nice-like that he was closing the Renegade and Caswell exceeded his orders. Russ, the more I think about this, the less sense it makes."

"I know it," Russ answered. "The trouble is, there's too much we don't know. I'm dead certain of one thing though—that as long as Cotty Bludge is mixed up in it, we've got to keep our eyes wide open. By golly, I know that feller."

In front of the hotel, the stage had arrived and was discharging passengers. A little man, wiping sweat from a very bald head, was fussing around with his baggage. It was this man who had attracted Russ Holder's attention. "I've seen him before, at the Lucky D—" Abruptly Russ broke off and glanced quickly at his companion.

Carrying an enormous suitcase, the fussy little man was going into the hotel.

"Bill, I've got some people I want to see," Russ spoke suddenly. "Grab yourself a bite to eat. I'll see you later." Russ started down the street.

"Where are you going? Wait a minute."

"I want to see some people." Holder's face was bland. "Wait for me at the Imperial saloon. I'll look you up there between eight and nine o'clock."

"What's the big rush?" But Russ was gone. Bill Wesco stared after him. "What the devil's eating him?" he muttered. Turning, he glanced toward the hotel. The fussy little man was just passing through the door. Had Russ been afraid this little man would see him? If so, who was the little man? What— Looking past the hotel, Bill forgot all about the little man. Coming along the sidewalk, a market basket under her arm, was Sunny Jones. At the sight of her, he felt his heart jump. Maybe—by golly, maybe she would ask him to supper!

A smile lit her face when she saw him. Very promptly, she asked him to supper. Very promptly, he accepted.

DURING the next two hours, Bill Wesco almost forgot all about the Renegade mine, almost but not quite. Being with Sunny was great fun but her father was there and always Bill was aware that her father was regarding him with uneasy speculation. Bill knew what was worrying Jones—the man knew what was in the bottom of the prospect shaft at the Lucky Devil. It was a secret Bill Wesco would very much like to have but he knew he couldn't ask. Jones had promised to reveal nothing discovered in this shaft and he was the type of man who kept his promise. On top of this was the fact that Jones was scared to talk. Watching him, Bill had the impression that Sunny's dad was even scared to have him in his house!

How scared Jones really was Bill did not realize until a knock sounded on the door. Jones reluctantly opened it. The scar-faced Husker walked into the room. At the sight of the man, Jones looked as if he was going to faint. "What do you want?" he quavered.

"I got something for this young feller," Husker said, nodding toward Bill Wesco.

"For me?" Bill moved quickly forward. "How'd you know where I was?"

"Saw you with the girl," Husker answered. "I asked around until I found out where she lived. Here." From his pocket, he took an envelope. Handing it to Bill Wesco, he turned and walked out of the house. Dazedly Bill opened the envelope.

"Dear Mr. Wesco: If you will be so kind as to come to the Regal Hotel at any time before ten o'clock tonight, I would like to discuss with you the sale of your stock in the Renegade mine.

Sincerely,
Caroline Sherman.

P.S. I have a suite of rooms and I will be in my sitting room. The number is 309.

C.

"Why, it's from a woman!" Sunny, reading over his shoulder, said. For a moment, her nose went up in the air and she regarded him with the same cold stare that women have used on their errant males since the beginning of time. Then she saw the trouble on his face and was instantly contrite. "I'm sorry, Bill. Something is wrong. What is it?"

"I'll say something is wrong!" her father spoke before Bill could answer. "That man works for Cotty Bludge!" He pointed to the door through which Husker had disappeared. "He'll tell Bludge that he saw you in my house! And Bludge will think that I have told you—" His voice went into choked silence.

"Told me what?" Bill Wesco said.

Jones' face was white. Anger moved on it—and fear. "I ain't gonna tell you nothing. I ain't gonna say a word!" He blurted out the words. "Get out of my house."

"Dad!" Sunny's voice rose in a wail.

"Sir?" Bill Wesco said.

"Get out of my house!" Jones repeated.

Bill Wesco moved to the door and through it and out into the night. A yard was in front of him, with a walk leading out to the gate. He was halfway to the gate when footsteps flurried behind him and Sunny's voice came calling to him. He waited. Her father came with her.

"Bill, I didn't mean it," Jones said bluntly. "You don't know how it is but I've got to protect my job, my neck, and my family. The best that can happen to a man who talks out of turn is that he will get his teeth kicked down his throat."

"It's all right," Bill said. " I understand." He felt a lot better. Getting kicked out of the house had jolted.

"No, it ain't all right," Jones denied. "I don't know anything about this woman Caroline Sherman. Maybe Cotty Bludge is taking her in too, maybe he ain't. But I know one thing for sure, Bill, if either she or Bludge wants to buy your stock in the Renegade—and let me tell you, somebody does want to buy it mighty bad—you can either sell it or risk getting killed for it. And you can't put off the decision. Since she has asked you to come to see her tonight, then tonight you've got to make up your mind. When something like this comes to a boil, things happen mighty fast. Tomorrow may be too late."

"Yes, sir," Bill said. "But Bludge already owns controlling interest in the Renegade. What more does he want?"

Jones hesitated, then blurted out sudden words. "When the minority interest is worth as much as the minority interest in the Renegade is worth, Cotty Bludge don't want just part of it—*he wants all of it!*"

"But—"

"Don't ask me any more questions!" Jones spoke harshly. I've already told you too much. Come on, Sunny. You and me are going in the house."

Sunny didn't want to go but obviously she knew she had to go. Bill Wesco watched the door close behind them. He turned, started out to the street. Two things he knew he had to do. The first was to find Russ Holder and tell him what had happened. Then, if they decided he should go talk to Miss Sherman, the second thing he wanted was to have lean, hard-bitten Russ Holder beside him the instant he stepped into the Regal Hotel.

He moved slowly toward the Imperial saloon, where he was supposed to meet Russ.

ON MAIN STREET, heavy boots clumped on the wooden sidewalks. Horses were tied at the hitching rails. Pianos tinkled from the saloons, men talked and laughed in the warm night. Moving down the street toward the Imperial saloon, Bill Wesco passed an alley.

From this alley a voice called his name. He stopped. The voice came again. "God damn—" Then from the alley came the thundering explosion of a gun.

The instant the shot sounded Main Street was filled with the thump of running boots as men jumped to get out of the way of stray shots. In Dominion, when a gun boomed, all loafers headed for cover.

Around Bill Wesco was the sound of running feet. Then, in the darkness of the alley, the gun boomed again. Answering it came a blast of fire from many guns.

Backing out of the alley, shooting as he moved, came a man. Flame spurted from his gun, reaching for some target back in the shadow. Flame leaped from the shadows toward him. As if snatched by an unseen hand, the man's hand flew from his head. Backing and shooting, the man reached the sidewalks, where he stumbled and sat down heavily. Not until then did Bill Wesco recognize him.

He was Russ Holder. Sitting down, Russ tried to shoot again up the alley. The hammer of his gun fell on an empty cartridge.

"His gun's empty!" a voice yelled up the alley. "Get him!"

Footsteps moved along the alley toward Russ Holder. Bill Wesco jumped in front of him. "I'll take it from here, Russ." In his hand, the gun roared.

In the alley, a man yelled. In his hand, Bill Wesco let the big gun rock. Flame reached toward him, a bullet spatted as it went past him, he fired at the flash of the gun.

"Crawl, Russ!" he yelled.

In the alley, men were running—in the other direction. His sudden appearance had surprised and startled them. He could see nothing.

"Get to cover, Bill," Russ Holder begged. He glanced around. Russ had crawled away from the mouth of the alley. He moved then.

The street was quiet. The only sound was the stamping of nervous horses, snorting their fear at the sound of the guns and at the smell of gunpowder. Russ Holder had propped himself against the front of the Imperial saloon.

"I—I waited for you, Bill."

"Russ!" Bill Wesco dropped to his knees. Holder had dropped his weapon and was fumbling for something in his inside coat pocket. "Who was it?"

"Billy Caswell!"

"But—"

"I know—we left him locked up in the powder house. But he's not there now." All of Holder's attention and maybe all of his strength was concentrated on getting something out of his pocket. Bill Wesco saw the round hole in the front of the coat.

"Russ! You're hurt. I'll get a doctor."

"Don't need—no sawbones!" Holder protested. His fumbling fingers finally found the object in his pocket. It came out, a mass of folded papers, with a bullet hole through them. He thrust the papers toward Bill Wesco.

"Here, Bill—stock—my part—of the Renegade—"

"To hell with that, Russ."

Holder seemed not to hear him. "My will, too. I made it—just a little while ago. I ain't got no kin. You get my stock—in the Renegade."

BILL WESCO heard the words and yet did not hear them. "To hell with the Renegade. Where are you hit, Russ?" Sweat was suddenly dripping from his face. "Here, let me lift you and carry you to a doctor."

"Too late for a sawbones, Bill. But it would be nice—to be carried by a millionaire!" Russ Holder chuckled at some secret joke. "Right now, Bill, you own thirty per cent of the Renegade. And that makes you—a millionaire."

Still chuckling, Holder's labored breathing picked up a heavy rasp. He spoke from the depths of pain. "The little man at the hotel—name is—Jenkins. See him, Bill. He's at the—Regal. Ask him about—Miss Sherman. She—she—"

"So you did duck me to talk to the little man! Darn you, Russ!"

"Sorry, Bill. Thought it might be safer. He—he— So long—Bill." The rasped breathing went into final silence. Holding a will and a stock certificate in his hands, Bill Wesco looked down at a dead man. Slipping the papers into his pocket, he began to reload his gun.

He was very calm about it. Without conscious direction from him, his fingers took care of the whole job. Along the sidewalk somewhere running footsteps sounded, coming toward him.

"Bill! Bill!" Sunny Jones sounded scared to death. He wondered why. He also wondered what she was doing here. She saw him, came running toward him. "H'lo, Miss Sunny," he said. "How'd you get out?"

"I went into my room and locked the door and slipped out through the window. Bill—" She became aware of the body of Russ Holder. "What—what happened?"

He got to his feet. "Come on, I'll tell you. Then I'll take you home."

"Take me home!"

"Sorry but that's the way it's got to be. This is no night for young ladies to be out of doors."

"But I came to help you, Bill. And you're treating me like a child."

"Help *me*?" Strange astonishment sounded in his voice. "I'm going to see a man—"

"About what?"

"About dying!" he answered. "I'm sorry, Miss Sunny, but I don't believe you can help me in that."

Aware that Billy Caswell was lurking here somewhere, he moved quickly. In the back of his mind, he wondered what had happened to Ed Langor, left to guard Caswell. Considering what had happened to Russ, he was afraid he knew what had happened to Ed. Joel Burton, Ed Langor, Russ Holder—three dead men. This was the price paid so far for the Renegade mine. What ore existed deep under the Renegade to make it worth this

They lifted him and threw him with a splintering crash on the rocks.

price? Solid gold? He didn't know and at this moment, he didn't care. The thought of gold—all his thoughts now —were on the surface of his mind. Underneath there seemed to be nothing, neither thoughts nor feeling. It had been this way since Russ Holder had died. Beside him, in frantic terror, walked Sunny. He turned down the side street toward her house.

"You don't need to take me. I can go by myself." She scurried ahead of him. He watched her leave, saw that she turned and looked back once. He was sorry to send her home but it had to be this way. She wouldn't like it, but— Shrugging, he walked back to the main street.

THE clerk at the Regal Hotel was accustomed to seeing all kinds of people at all times of the day and night. "Good evening, sir. Room, sir?"

"I'm calling to see Miss Sherman."

"Oh." The clerk's face said he had been told that Miss Sherman was expecting a caller. "You're Mr. Wesco, sir? Room 309. Go right up."

"Thanks." He moved toward the stairs, then turned back to the clerk, asking another question.

"A Mr. Jenkins? Yes, I believe he is registered here." The clerk consulted a register. "Mr. Jenkins is in room 314."

"Is he in?"

"So far as I know, sir. I know he was in a couple of hours ago because he had a caller." A frown wrinkled the clerk's face. "An odd caller he was too. He went up and talked to Mr. Jenkins, then came down and asked me for paper to write his will. He sat right in the lobby while he wrote it. I witnessed it for him. Odd, wasn't it."

"Odd as hell!" Bill Wesco said. "Stick around and you can witness mine." He went up the stairs. So far as he could tell, no one in the lobby paid any attention to him. The second floor was quiet, the third floor was the same. Bill went quietly down the hall. A crack under the door of 309 showed light. He walked quickly past. The hall turned to the left. He knocked on the door of room 314. He didn't have long to wait.

Inside, someone stirred. "Who is it?" a voice asked.

"Someone to see you, Mr. Jenkins. Important."

The door opened six inches. He could see half of Jenkins. Jenkins was the little bald-headed man all right. "What do you want?" Jenkins said. The little man had snapping, go-to-hell eyes.

"I want to come in," Bill said. He pushed against the door. It swung open, revealing Jenkins. It also revealed the .45 Colt Jenkins was holding. The Colt was centered on Bill Wesco. Bill glanced at the gun. "Think you'll need it?" he said.

"Do *you* think so?" Jenkins answered.

"I came to talk, not to shoot," Bill said, and waited while Jenkins sized him up. Jenkins closed the door. "All right, talk," he said.

"Russ Holder told me to come and see you," Bill said.

"Holder? Oh, yes." Jenkins kept the gun ready in his hand. "What about Holder?"

"He told me to ask you about Miss Caroline Sherman," Bill said, and waited.

He kept right on waiting. Jenkins didn't say anything. Bill didn't say anything. "What the hell is this all about?" Jenkins impatiently snapped. "I am Miss Sherman's legal representative. If you have a legitimate question to ask about my client, I'll try to answer it. But I don't like this cat and mouse business."

Inside, Bill felt frozen. "You are her lawyer?" he said.

"Yes."

Inside, Bill was aware of a desperate feeling, like the sensation of an animal caught in a trap. He had walked in on a man who said he was Caroline Sherman's lawyer and the lawyer had a gun in his hand! "I guess I made a mistake," he said desperately and started toward the door.

"Stand still!" Jenkins said.

Bill stood still. He looked at the gun, estimating what would happen if he tried to grab it.

Jenkins snapped go-to-hell eyes at him. "What do you want to know about Miss Sherman? You came in here to ask about her. Now—ask!"

JENKINS was acting like an honest man. Even in his startled state, Bill realized this fact. It jarred him, made him wonder. Also, he knew that Jenkins had arrived in Dominion this afternoon. "I guess I'm a little mixed up," he said. "I wasn't expecting to run into Miss Sherman's lawyer. As a matter of fact, I was coming here to meet her when Russ told me to see you first—" He didn't mention the circumstances under which Russ Holder had told him to see this man.

The go-to-hell look faded from Jenkins' eyes. "You were coming to this hotel to see Miss Sherman?" the man questioned, astonishment in his voice. "What kind of a game are you trying to work? Miss Sherman isn't in this hotel. She's in New York."

"She's *where*?" Bill gasped.

"In New York!" Jenkins answered. "What is so astonishing about that? I'm damned if I understand either your questions or your actions!"

"I'm damned if I understand yours either!" Bill answered. "I met a woman in this hotel today who said she was Caroline Sherman, the daughter of Haldane Sherman—"

"Then she was lying!" Jenkins answered. Sincerity rang in the tones of his voice. Listening to him, there was no doubt that he not only knew the truth but he was telling it. "I came here on specific instructions from Miss Sherman, as her lawyer, to determine the value of the property her late father owned in this area. Miss Sherman is now in New York and to my certain knowledge, she has never been west of the Mississippi."

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins," Bill Wesco said. "That is exactly what I wanted to know. And now, I'm in the devil of a hurry. I'll see you tomorrow and explain this whole thing to you." He moved toward the door.

Jenkins grumbled but did not attempt to stop him. At the door, he paused. "If I'm alive tomorrow," he said. He went out.

If Caroline Sherman was in New York, and there seemed no reason to doubt it, then who was the woman waiting for him in room 309?

OUTSIDE 309, he paused. The crack of light still showed under the door but there was no sound from within the room. He hesitated there, wondering if he should enter? Or should he keep on walking? The hotel was quiet, no one was in sight in the hall. He knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" a throaty voice called. He answered. The door opened Caroline Sherman stood there. Wearing some soft garment for which he had no name, she smiled at him. "So nice of you to come, Mr. Wesco." She held open the door and he entered.

In the room was the fragrance of expensive perfume mingled with the thin odor of cigar smoke. Did she smoke cigars? It seemed unlikely. A single closed door led into the bedroom. Windows at the front of the room opened out over the main street of Dominion.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Wesco? There was shooting outside and I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"There is always shooting in a town like this, Miss Sherman. You will have to get used to our wild western ways."

"I'm trying to," she answered. "But what happened?"

He shrugged. "Some drunks, I guess, shooting out the lights. There is a rough element in Dominion, Miss Sherman, which seems to overawe the town marshal. I imagine it isn't like this in New York, where you have the police to deal with such disturbers. Unfortunately, we haven't grown up out here yet. The country is so new that five years ago Apaches were camping where this hotel now stands."

"How interesting!" Her eyes said this was interesting indeed, all the more so because of the man telling it. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Wesco? I have some brandy here."

"No, thanks." He took a chair by the window where he could watch both doors into the room. "It seems odd to be doing business with a woman."

"Ah, but in the East many women are taking an interest in business. And—are you ready to do business, Mr. Wesco? If so, what price do you set on your holdings in the Renegade?"

He grinned, amiably. "What price would you care to offer, Miss Sherman?"

The violet eyes appraised him. "Five thousand dollars," she said. "Does that

seem a fair price? Mr. Bludge said it was. He sold me his entire holdings in the mine for ten thousand. Of course, I really don't know much about these things."

"No one does," he said. "Even if you know exactly what is in a mine, it is hard to set a fair value on it. However, nobody doubts that Mr. Bludge is an expert on mines. He is helping you in this, I imagine?"

"Of course. I feel I am very lucky in having him to help me. I would be lost without him."

He listened carefully to the way she spoke. Caroline Sherman was a very rich woman. She had lived all her life in New York and had certain tastes in clothes, certain manners, and a way of speaking that inevitably would reveal her background. This woman had good clothes and a manner about her. When he had first met her, he had accepted her without question as Caroline Sherman. Now, listening to the way she spoke, he realized she wasn't pronouncing the words quite right. She was trying hard and under any other circumstances, she would have fooled him. She smiled at him, her eyes said he was a wonderful person, and very cleverly she flattered him. If the situation had been different, he would have been very pleased just to talk to her, and as for selling his stock in the Renegade, he would have been tickled to do it.

He saw the trap. It was the oldest trap on earth—the trap of a pretty woman.

THE trap smiled at him. "So are you willing to take five thousand dollars for your stock in the Renegade mine, Mr. Wesco?"

He smiled back to her. And shook his head.

"No?" Her eyes said she was puzzled. "Then what price are you willing to take, Mr. Wesco?"

He grinned. "Five hundred thousand dollars!" he said.

"Five hundred thou—" He watched the puzzled expression of her eyes change swiftly into alarm. If he wanted that price for his stock, then he knew its value! For an instant her soul looked out of her eyes, frightened and suddenly terribly afraid, then she drew a swift veil over her feelings.

"But you are joking, Mr. Wesco!"

"No, I'm not joking!" he said. "I'm no more joking than you are Caroline Sherman! What's your real name, lady? I don't have to ask you what your game is—I know that. You're working for Cotty Bludge. Your job is to buy every share of stock you can, not only in the Renegade but every other surrounding mine, to catch every sucker who wears pants and is ready to fall for a pretty face, to buy the stock and sign it over to Cotty Bludge. That's your game, lady, and don't try to deny it!"

He was on his feet. "Cotty Bludge is using every trick in a crooked deck to get every share of stock he can. If he can't buy it, he'll steal it, if he can't steal it, he'll kill for it, but if he can't get it any other way, he'll use you to buy it for him."

From terror-stricken eyes, she stared at him.

"And you're trying to play me for a sucker!" He went on. His voice was hot with anger.

She screamed.

Behind her, the bed room door was snatched open. Bludge stood there. He had a Colt in his hand. At the sight of him, Bill Wesco understood the meaning of the trace of cigar smoke he had smelled in this room when he first entered it. He had smelled Bludge's cigar. He realized now that Bludge had heard every word he had said. Bludge had been listening in the next room.

What Bludge intended to do was obvious. Kill him! He knew too much. Bludge had a perfect excuse for murder, one that any miner in Dominion would accept. Bludge could claim he had caught Wesco in the act of molesting a woman.

With this kind of a reason, no one would ask any questions, except why hadn't he shot sooner.

The gun in Bludge's hand was already coming up. Knowing he didn't have a chance, Bill went for his gun. The woman who had called herself Caroline Sherman screamed.

Bill did not clearly see what happened. She was in the line of fire from Bludge's gun. Screaming, she tried to get out of the way, and tripped—and fell toward Bludge.

The gun thundered in Bludge's hand. The bullet intended for Bill Wesco struck the woman known as Caroline Sherman.

For a split second, all movement in the room seemed frozen. Like a gargoyle, Bludge stood in the doorway, the smoking gun in his hand, a look of incredulous surprise on his face. He seemed to have difficulty in understanding what had happened. During that split second Bill Wesco got his own gun free of leather.

The woman fell into Bludge's arms. He grabbed her. Aware that Bill Wesco's gun was coming up, Bludge threw her —toward Bill, and ducked back through the bed room door. The door slammed shut behind him and there was the rattle of a key turning in the lock.

WITH his left arm, Bill caught her. He put one shot through the door, looked at her. Blood was already staining the front of her dress. She was coughing and trying to speak and sagging in his arms as strength drained out of her.

In a calmer moment, he might have thought she deserved something like this —for certainly she had lured him to what might easily have been his death— but this was not a calm moment. He thought only that she was a woman, that she was badly hurt, that he had to get her to a doctor.

In both arms, he lifted her. His right hand, under her bent knees, still held the gun. He moved to the hall door, kicked it open, lunged into the hall.

A man standing against the wall hit him on the back of the head, a thundering blow that sent needles of bright pain flaring through his brain. Staggering under his burden, he went to one knee. Dazedly he saw three men in the hall— Husker, Billy Caswell, and one of the men who had been with Caswell at the mine.

It was Husker who had hit him—with the barrel of a pistol. Husker's scarred face twitched as he brought the barrel of the gun up for another blow, the final lick that would end this fight.

Firing under her body, Bill Wesco shot upward, a bullet that drove upward and hit Husker below the ribs, smashing straight up into and through the man's heart.

Husker dropped the gun. His face sagged. His lips twisted as he tried to speak.

"Git him—Kas!" he husked, and fell.

Still holding the woman in his arms, Bill Wesco shot once—at Caswell. And missed. He didn't get a second shot. Caswell and the man with him both ducked through a door and out of sight. They made no secret of their hurry.

Bill got to his feet. His whole body felt numb. The lick on the back of the head had been a jolter. He stumbled down the hall, aware that the floor under him seemed to be sloping down, like a slanting tunnel. He knew this couldn't be right, that the floor was level, that he only thought it was slanting. He was having trouble with his feet. The woman in his arms was an intolerable burden.

A flight of stairs appeared before him. He tried not to go down them, knowing they were the front stairs, but the hall tipped under him and he went down the stairs anyway—head over heels, thudding to a stop on the second floor. He tried to get to his feet, discovered he couldn't make it. "Have to wait a minute," he mumbled. "Have to wait—"

He was aware that the woman was not moving. He tried to find a heart beat. There wasn't any heart beat.

The woman—whoever she really was

—who had called herself Caroline Sherman, was dead.

He laid her gently on the floor. She sprawled there like a rag doll that has lost its stuffing. "Sorry, lady," he muttered.

Overhead on the floor above footsteps pounded. He listened to them, trying to estimate where they were going. They were coming toward him. He got to his feet.

Somewhere there were back stairs, if he could find them. He found the front stairs. From below startled faces looked up at him. If he went that way, he would be seen.

Moving back, he hunted for the back stairs, found them, started down them. He was dizzy and numb. Somehow his foot slipped. Rolling like a ball, he went down the stairs, crashing into a door at the bottom. Under the thundering jar of his hurtling body, the door flew open.

He fell headlong to the ground in the alley behind the hotel and groaned and tried to crawl away—and collapsed.

HE HEARD the sound of running footsteps. Dim and far away, the sound was of no concern to him and did not disturb him. He felt mighty good where he was right now, his head on a pillow and nothing to bother him. Mighty soft this pillow was, mighty comfortable. He liked it. Snuggling down close against the pillow, he prepared to go back to sleep. The running footsteps came again. Somewhere near him, they stopped.

"Hey, Kas!" a voice yelled.

Kas! Where had he heard that name before? It sounded familiar to him, somehow. He tried to place it, rummaging around in a memory that didn't seem to be working quite right. Who was Kas?

"Kas, I don't know where that son could have got to," the voice came again.

"By God, find him!" Kas answered. "Cotty said to get him—or else!"

Kas—Caswell! His groping memory finally made the right connection and told him who Kas was. Billy Caswell! At the same time he remembered everything that had happened to him before he laid his head down on this pillow. Shock jolted through him. He started to sit up. The pillow grabbed him.

"Sh!" a fierce little voice said somewhere very close to him. "Sh, Bill. Don't move. Don't make a sound. They're right on the other side of the fence from us, hunting you, and if you make a sound, they'll hear you."

"Sunny!" he gasped. Her fingers closed over his lips. He let his head sink back on the pillow and realized that the "pillow" was actually Sunny's lap. "I—I thought I sent you home," he whispered.

"You did. But beause you sent me didn't mean I had to go."

"Where am I?"

"In a woodshed across the alley behind the Regal Hotel."

"How'd I get here?"

"I dragged you here."

He lay still and let the miracle of Sunny dragging him to safety sink into his mind. Actually she had saved his life. He knew very well what would have happened to him if Kas had come down the back stairs and found him while he was still unconscious in the alley. His end would have been short and not sweet.

"Where's my gun?"

"Here it is." Her hands moved in the darkness and he felt the still-warm metal pressed into his fingers. He fumbled for the catch to break it and reload.

"I've already loaded it," Sunny whispered.

He let the miracle of Sunny loading a gun sink into his mind.

On the other side of the fence, Kas and his companion had moved away. Inside the Regal was a commotion, shouts and the sound of raised voices. He got quietly to his feet. Sunny did not protest. The door of the woodshed was open and he moved to it, stood in it. A board fence ran along the alley. Just beyond the alley the bulk of the Regal Hotel was visible. Light showed through the rec-

tangle of the open back door through which he had crashed.

"I can slip across the alley and up the back stairs," he said.

"What about Kas?" Sunny said.

"They're looking for me somewhere else," he said. "While they're hunting me somewhere else, I'll go into the hotel." He paused, sought for the words he wanted to use. "Caswell is a hired gunman. I want him but I want Cotty Bludge the most. Everything that has happened, started with Bludge. Because of him, Joel Burton, Russ Holder, and Ed Langor are dead. I'll be dead too, if he can catch me. He's probably still in the hotel. I'm going in after him."

He expected Sunny to protest. Instead, she said quietly, "I'll go with you."

"Sunny, you will not!"

"Why won't I? If you die, what is there for me to live for?" There was a catch in her voice but behind the catch he sensed complete determination.

"Sunny, you can't. You—" He groped for a reason why she couldn't, found one. "You don't even have a gun. Going in there without a gun would just be prime foolishness."

"I do too have a gun," she answered. For the first time he became aware of the weapon she was holding.

She had a gun! "Where'd you get that?" he whispered.

"I went back to where Russ Holder lay and got his gun," she answered.

"You—" He didn't know what to say.

"Please understand me, Bill," her whisper came again. "I hate guns. I don't ever want to see another one as long as I live. But you're going into that hotel with a gun. You've got to go. I know that. There just isn't anything else you *can* do. And there isn't anything else I can do except go with you."

BACK of Sunshiny Morning Jones were the pioneer women of a new world, the women who had crossed the plains in covered wagons, the women who at an earlier date had come westward with their men across the mountain barrier of the Alleghenies, who, earlier still, had landed on the grimly forbidding shores of the continent itself. They had never turned back. They had never even looked back. Sunny was their daughter.

She could turn back, she could slip away home and crawl back in through a bedroom window and cry herself to sleep in the night. But would she?

They hadn't turned back, had they? She was their daughter, wasn't she? Would she turn back?

Bill Wesco knew she wouldn't. He knew the question was past all argument, past all debate. Where he went, she went.

He could turn back, he could sneak away in the darkness, he could hide and run, but would he? Back of him was the same heritage that was back of Sunny. With him too, the question of turning back was also past all argument, past all debate.

"Sunny, I'm a lucky man," he said. The issue was settled. He moved toward the opening in the fence, stopped.

Somewhere down the alley toward the street sixguns were suddenly hooting in the night. Two guns thundered down there. For a second, while four shots sounded, the sixguns continued their hooting, then a fifth shot came, a blasting roar that shook the very foundations of Dominion. "Shotgun!" Bill thought. After the shotgun had spoken the sixguns were silent, the way the coyotes are quiet after a timber wolf howls in the night.

A man screamed. Down the alley a man came running. He ran as if the devil was after him, as if painted Apaches were chasing him. His footsteps pounded down the alley and out of hearing.

The night was quiet.

"Come on," Bill said. "While everybody is worrying about that scattergun, we can get across the alley."

At a run, he crossed the alley. She came right behind him. Ahead of him loomed the flight of stairs down which he had tumbled so thunderously from the

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Bullet Barriers

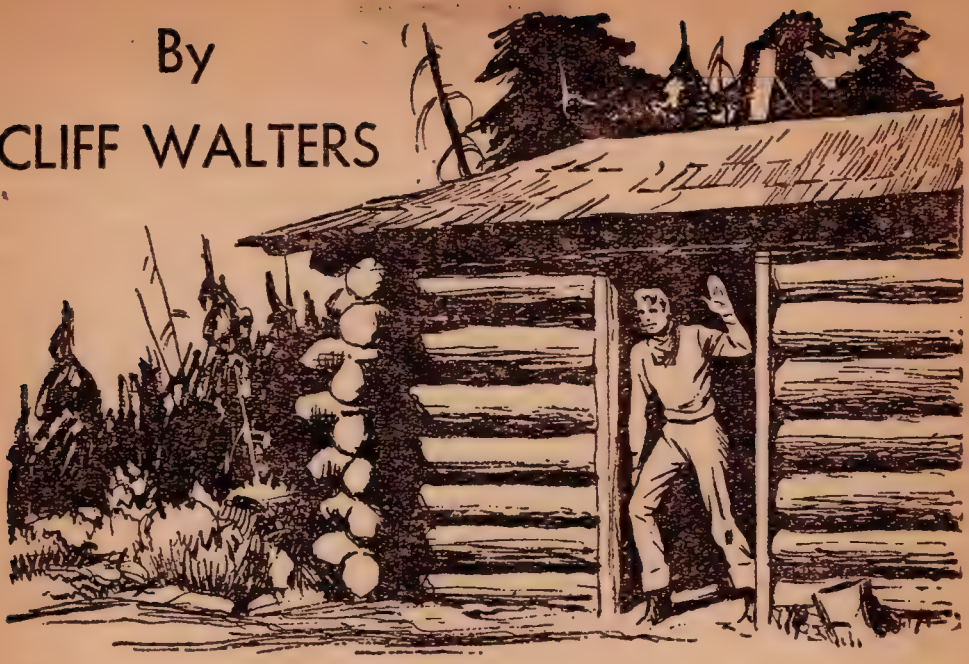
ALL day long, lean, rugged-shouldered Jeff Gardner and his roan horse had trailed in the dusty wake of cattle, a herd of thin, spike-horned Texas yearlings that had inched along like a motley-colored dragon through the Wyoming sagebrush. Now, with three hard-earned dollars in his pocket—and wishing it were three hundred with which he could buy at a bargain price some of those yearlings that their trail-weary owner couldn't sell—Jeff rode homeward in the June dusk. Back to his old cabin at Tall Grass Springs. If he could borrow some money at the bank in Ox Yoke, maybe . . .

It was a jarring blast of gunfire that suddenly welded the rider tight to saddle

Illustrated by
H. W. Kiemle

Jeff hit the man with his braced stirrup and bowled him over into the sagebrush.

By
CLIFF WALTERS



Sure, his brother was a hunted owlhoot —but Jeff Gardner wasn't going to see his own life wrecked by the sneers and hatred of his neighbors. He cleared his own reputation, and pinned the source of the trouble right where it belonged.

leather. He reined up his fast-walking horse, stared ahead with wide gray eyes and saw little jets of powder flame dancing like a circle of giant fireflies down there on the level terrain around his cabin. Gun echoes reverberated across the dusk-cloaked hills and hammered with an icy tide at Jeff Gardner's heart. Like wolf fangs crunching into dry bones, he heard lead biting into and slivering the chinking of log walls. A low moan escaped the tall man's lips. He was saying, "Dave! They've got him cornered!" Then spur rowels were clinking against a roan, and the fleet, rangy mount was bounding forward.

Jeff was within two hundreds yards of the cabin when he saw his brother Dave stagger out the doorway, his right arm hanging limp, but his left arm upraised. Just ahead of Jeff a brawny young man rose from behind a clump of sage and trained his .30-30 on Dave Gardner. Jeff swerved his hard-running horse, cut close to the brawny man with the carbine. A boot-braced stirrup swung away from the roan's belly. It hit the husky man on the left shoulder and bowled him over into the clump of sage. Jeff hastened to the cabin.

Dave Gardner was sagging down, his gray cotton shirt stained with red splotches. Jeff slid from his saddle, bent down and said, "Dave! It's me—Jeff!"

"'Lo, Kid." Dave Gardner tried to smile. "Had a few words—to say—in

private. But here comes—the vultures that—"

"Get back!" Jeff commanded the dozen men who, guns in readiness, were converging on the scene. "You've taken his life! What more do you want? A chance to pick the carcass?"

Men dropped back under the sting of those words, and as Jeff, his voice and eyes deadly cold, picked up the fallen six-shooter of his outlaw brother.

Jeff dropped to one knee, yanked off his dusty hat and pillowed his brother's head on it. He said, "Yes, Dave?"

"Bend—down—closer, Kid!" pleaded the other, clinging with all his might to a slender thread of life which would soon snap.

A few words, then Death winging over the dusk-enveloped hills. And swooping down to claim its bullet-torn prey at Tall Grass Springs. Big boots clumping the hard-packed earth. Jeff rising slowly, turning to face brawny Roland Stroud, a tow-headed man with pale blue eyes, who was running forward with his .30-30 carbine, and shouting: "You're not scarin' *me* away, Jeff Gardner! I'll make One-Eye Gardner talk! Make him tell me what he done with that loot he took off *me*—after he shot me!"

"Dave's dead," Jeff said slowly.

"Did he say—"

"Get out," Jeff commanded. "Get off my place. Stay off!"

"Not yet!" big Stroud snapped. "I didn't like bein' knocked down when you come ridin' up behind me—and when I was drawin' a bead on—"

"Drawin' a bead on a man that was already dyin'—and tryin' to surrender," Jeff said. "Provin' that the rest of you's as yellow as your hair!"

"Yellow, eh?"

Roland Stroud lunged forward, lashing out with a big fist as he came. Jeff sidestepped that blow. His own right fist lashed out and crashed to Stroud's face. It was a hard punch. Stroud tipped backwards and fell. He bounded up, but old Tom Blair, who worked at the livery stable in Ox Yoke, caught his arm and said, "Come on, Roland. We come out here to get Dave Gardner, not Jeff."

JEFF picked a limp form up and carried it inside the cabin, laid it on the tarpaulin-covered bunk in the corner. For a long moment he looked down at the man people had called One-Eye Gardner. Memories galloped through Jeff Gardner's mind. He remembered the first pony he and Dave had broken to ride.... Dave, handsome until he had lost his left eye in an accident three years ago.... The old dugout where they had camped together while chasing wild horses out in the Sand Buttes badlands. Dave streaking it along like the wind behind a bunch of tangle-maned mustangs. Or sitting up in the middle of a crooked-jumping, sunfishing ride runner, and mastering him with all the grace and skill of a man born to the saddle. Dave, much in love, looking forward to the day when he would marry blonde Bessie Stroud, Roland's sister. Then, a mustang bucking into a barbed-wire fence. Hoofs tangling with wire. A spill. And Dave losing his left eye. A blonde girl's sudden coolness—and her sudden interest in sleek, tricky Deck Davidson, an Ox Yoke gambler....

The night Dave had ridden home from town—fast—and his brief story as he stuffed a few of his personal belongings in a gunny sack. Deck Davidson taking his money away from him in a poker game after Dave had drunk too much. Deck taunting him about winning his girl as well as his money. Dave succumbing to the fire of liquor and the sudden explosion of long-smouldering resentment. He had tangled with the gambler, had beaten him to death with his fists. Now he must travel. Where? To South America, perhaps.... So long, Kid.... But Dave, law-wanted, had turned to the owl hoot. And twice his dark trail had led him back through Ox Yoke, much to Jeff's sorrow. Dave had taken three hundred dollars away from Doc Darnell, a thrifty man who, Dave thought, had overcharged him for treatment of his eye. And another two hundred away

from Baldy Rolfe, the storekeeper, who had once padded a store bill owed by the Gardner brothers.

But what had stung Jeff most deeply was the shame he had experienced when he had heard that his badman brother had robbed and wounded Roland Stroud who had taken a bunch of horses over to the sales ring at Sage City. Most of those horses had belonged to Tom Blair, Lorna's father. Blair had suffered the loss of twelve hundred dollars. And Roland Stroud had lost three hundred of his own money to Dave Gardner, he had said. . . .

NOW a footstep sounded at the door. Jeff shook off the dark fog of memory. He turned and saw a slim, auburn-haired girl standing there. Shadows in her deep blue eyes, a tremor in her pleasantly low voice, Lorna Blair faltered, "Is there anything I—I can do, Jeff?"

"No, thanks," he answered flatly. "It looks like the Blairs, the Strouds and the other gents from Ox Yoke have finished the job."

She stiffened. "And you're going to hate them for it the rest of your life—and prove that blood's thicker than water? Is that it?"

"I'm not aimin' to pin any medals on your friend, Roland Stroud, for helpin' kill Dave. If that means the Gardner wolf blood is croppin' out in me, we'll let it stand that way."

"You're flaring up at Roland because he happened to be the one who sighted Dave heading this way across the hills?"

"I didn't know that till now," was the bitter reply. "He wanted enough help, didn't he?"

"Listen, Jeff," said the girl gently. "You've had a hard jolt. But don't get mad. And don't single Roland out to sink your claws in. Oh, I know you blame Bessie Stroud for quitting Dave after he lost his eye, but that wasn't Roland's fault." The girl looked around the cabin. She looked at the bullet-shattered lamp lying on the floor, and at the open cupboard in the corner where juice dripped from a lead-perforated tomato can. She said, "Let me help you straighten things up. I hate to leave you here alone with—"

"Never mind," Jeff told her. "You'd better ketch the others—the self-appointed posse headin' back to town. It's gettin' dark. . . . Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she answered. She rubbed a silver drop from her eyelash and turned away. Her footsteps, then hoofbeats of her pony died in the distance.

DAWN light was burnishing cloud streamers on the eastern horizon when Jeff Gardner, riding his roan and leading an old buckskin cow pony he called Shorty, halted in front of a remote dugout at the edge of the Sand Buttes badlands. The tall man dismounted and entered a doorway that sagged from the weight of the dirt mounded above it. He struck a match, then lit a stub of candle which lay on a crude, home-made table.

He looked around and saw a little grub in a box in the corner. Then he picked up an old rusty horseshoeing rasp and began digging, with the pointed end of it, in the dirt beneath the grub box. The rasp end jarred against tin. Jeff withdrew a can from the hole and bent the lid back. There was a roll of curency in it. . . . Just as a dying man had said. . . .

Jeff carried the grub outdoors. Then he went to the old buckskin horse, loosened ropes and carried a heavy, tarpaulin-wrapped burden into the dugout. He laid that burden gently against the rear wall of dirt, then removed his hat and stood for a long moment in silence. At last he came out of the dugout. He anchored his lariat to one of the cedar uprights that braced the dirt-weighted doorway. He swung to his saddle, dallied the end of his rope around the horn and eased the roan horse away until the rope was taut.

The roan's legs stiffened. Cedar wood creaked—and down came the dugout structure, the whole thing caving in with a mighty jar. The dry dust on top swirled upward, and Jeff Gardner said, "So long—Dave!" And the low voice was

unsteady, the vast sweep of the badlands blurred.

Jeff mounded the caved-in dugout with slabs of sandrock carried down from the hillside above. Then the tall man rode away, leading the old buckskin Dave had broken—once the best cowhorse in the county. Jeff didn't head for home. He headed for the Castlerock Springs where, at sundown yesterday evening, he had ridden away from a bunch of steers.

Those steers hadn't been driven far from their bed ground by a half-dozen trail-weary riders when Jeff rode up to Sam Hargrave, the lank, grizzled Texan who had trailed them north, and said, "Mornin', Sam."

"Mornin', cowboy." Sam Hargrave looked a little surprised. "You cravin' to earn another three dollars today, and after I told you yesterday that me and the other boys could make it from here on?"

"Raised a little money," Jeff said. "Figgered I'd buy a few of these Texas slab-sides, the poorest of 'em—the drags that are holdin' you back—if you want to get rid of 'em bad enough."

"Show your money, cowboy," said the Texan eagerly. He turned in his saddle and yelled, "Hey, Pecos! Tell Slim and Pedro to hold up the lead!"

Several hours later Jeff Gardner was drifting a bunch of spike-horned steers down onto the lush range of Tall Grass Springs. He and his roan weren't doing all the work. Shorty, the little buckskin, was helping. Bridle reins tied up to the saddle-horn, he moved along behind the little herd. And sometimes when a steer lagged back, Shorty flattened his ears and nipped at the steer's rump. Shorty didn't need a rider. He knew what to do.

The steers soon drifted of their own accord toward the little creek, water owned by Jeff. And their new owner wondered who he could get to help brand them. Maybe old Bob McNorth, owner of the cow outfit over on Agate Creek where Jeff sometimes worked—an outfit for which he broke a lot of horses—would lend him a branding crew for a few hours. . . . He wasn't sure of where he could get any help.

WEARILY Jeff unsaddled his two horses, fed them wild hay and went to the cabin. He paused in the doorway. The place had been tidied up. The floor had been scrubbed. Everything was in order. And on the table was a chocolate cake—and a note, written in a girl's handwriting, which read: "Brought Rev. Lathrop out this morning, but you had gone. If you get lonesome, come to town and visit Dad and me. . . . Lorna."

Jeff had eaten his belated dinner, was finishing a piece of chocolate cake when Al Harrington, the sheriff from over at Camperville, rode up. A squat, short-spoken man, the sheriff wanted to ask a few questions about what had happened yesterday.

"Ask the posse in Ox Yoke," Jeff said. "They handled things."

"Any objections to the *way* they handled 'em?" Harrington countered bluntly. "There was open season on One-Eye Gardner, and I think the citizens of Ox Yoke should have a vote of thanks for not letting your badman brother get away—and probably rob, or shoot somebody else—like he did Roland Stroud that time!"

"Go and cast your vote of thanks then," Jeff replied. He rose and started picking up the tin plate and cup.

"Whose steers are these out here?" Harrington demanded.

"Mine."

"Yeah? When did *you* raise enough money to buy cattle? And *where* did you raise it?"

"That's my business," Jeff answered.

Face reddening, the officer clicked, "Did your badman brother bequeath you some loot? Is that why you fought Roland Stroud away from the carcass yesterday? Before Stroud could get any of his—and Tom Blair's—money back?"

"The taxpapers ain't payin' you to make wild guesses, Harrington," said Jeff, his gray eyes narrowing. "If you've got a warrant for my arrest, show it. If

you ain't, get out!" He moved toward the door.

Harrington backed away quickly. He mounted his sorrel horse and rode off toward Ox Yoke.

THE next morning, leaving his steers in the pasture along the creek, Jeff rode over to Agate Creek to ask Bob McNorth about borrowing some help for branding. Lank McNorth looked hard at his visitor and said, "I'm afraid not, Jeff. I was down at Ox Yoke last night. Folks there don't like the way you bought them range-roamin' Texas slab-sides any better'n I do. Why didn't you turn that loot money you found in One-Eye's pockets over to—"

Jeff didn't hear the rest. He rode back home, and then on to Ox Yoke, the little town standing stark and unlovely on a windswept flat. Jeff went in Baldy Rolfe's store, laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter and asked for some coffee.

A paunchy, heavy-jowled man who was no tidier than his store, Rolfe looked through thick spectacles at the ten-dollar bill and said, "Sorry, Mr. Gardner. I'm not takin' that kind of money—not unless you want me to credit it agen the two hundred dollars your owlhoot brother took away from me once at the point of a gun!"

"If you hadn't been so tricky about paddin' a store bill—chargin' stuff that we never bought—Dave wouldn't have bothered you," Jeff said coldly.

"Get out of my store," Rolfe rumbled. "Stay out!"

"Sure," Jeff answered, fighting mad but controlling his wrath. He walked out to the hitching rack and untied his horse. Then he walked across the street where a young man, who looked like a drifter, leaned across that deserted hitching rack.

Yes, the drifter would help brand some cattle—if Jeff would stake him to a couple of dollars so he could get his horse out of the barn where Tom Blair worked.

Jeff was handing the money over when Lorna Blair and Roland Stroud came riding up the street. Stroud looked hard at Jeff and said, "Well, if it ain't the new *cattle king* in town!"

"Hello, Lorna," Jeff said, ignoring Stroud. "I want to thank you for that cake, which was mighty good, and for cleanin' up the—"

"Don't mention it," she said—and rode on, her blue eyes chill. She was formal as she could be.

It was slow work for two men, branding yearling steers. But Jeff's roan horse and old Shorty, the buckskin, had plenty of rope savvy. They held the rope-snared steers stretched out while Jeff and Slim Donahue worked on the ground.

Slim, a happy-go-lucky drifter, said, "Wish you had more work for me, Jeff. I haven't got it in for you half as much as the folks in Ox Yoke."

"That's 'cause you don't realize—bein' a stranger—what a dirty, loot-lovin' coyote I am," Jeff answered gently. "They'd have me in jail right now—if they could *prove* anything."

Slim Donahue went his way. Jeff rode the hills alone, turning back young steers with a proclivity to roam far and wide. Summer turned into autumn, with the haze of Indian Summer hanging on the distant mountains.

If riders passed across the Tall Grass range, none of them stopped to pass the time of day or share a meal with a tall young man who lived like an exile, and whose lonely cabin had become a jail. One day Tom Blair and Lorna drove by on a wagon, heading for Big Cedar Draw to haul a load of wood. If they saw Jeff standing by his corral watching them, there was no indication. The wagon creaked around a promontory and disappeared. And, like a knife twisting in his heart, Jeff remembered the chill he had seen in a pair of long-lashed blue eyes that day in town. Eyes filled with accusation.

The next time Lorna Blair passed by, she was helping big Roland Stroud drive a small bunch of horses toward Ox Yoke. Stroud was now buying and selling horses regularly, was planning on opening a sales ring in Ox Yoke. And, Jeff had

heard from a drifter, planning to marry Lorna Blair. . . .

Winter was fairly mild and open. There was plenty of grass for the steers Jeff guarded closely. Their ribs didn't show so much now. They were growing fatter as well as taller. It was Christmas Eve when Jeff, leading a grub-laden pack horse back from Camperville, the county seat thirty miles away, came home to find a box on the table in his cabin. It was a box of fudge. There was no note on it, but Jeff knew that one person in Ox Yoke had remembered him. A little grimly he said, "Thanks, Lorna Blair, for the candy —and the pity."

Spring broke early. Jeff rounded up what horses he had out in the hills, and started breaking the eight head that would make saddle horses.

IT WAS May when Jeff, at daylight one morning, saddled his roan and started fogging eight head of young, well-broke horses toward Sage City, the wild and fast-growing town a hundred miles to the south. It was dusk that second evening when the tall, dust-coated rider corraled those horses in the pens that belonged to the Sage City Auction Ring Company.

"Nice bunch of ponies," observed the plump, well-dressed owner of that prospering enterprise as he wrote out a list. "Where you from, Gardner?"

"The Sandrock Basin country."

"Any relation to—"

"No relatives left at all," Jeff said quickly. "What time does the sale start tomorrow?"

"Ten o'clock in the morning."

"How would some Texas steers, fat two-year-olds sell here now?"

"Good. You got some? If you have, I'll send my son home with you and he'll buy 'em there, if you say so—and if the price is right."

"I'll think it over, let you know in the morning. Right now I'm goin' to stable my roan and put on the feed bag myself."

Sage City, a bustling place, was a welcome sight to a man who had been living like a hermit. It was good to hear the voices on the broad, well-lighted main street; to hear people laugh; to see shiny new buggies, drawn by fast-stepping teams, whisking along. If Jeff was tired after his long ride, he didn't go to bed early in the little hotel where he had rented a room for the night. He sought a barber shop and had his shaggy hair trimmed off, and bought a shave.

Afterwards, he wandered over to the street a block away. Piano music came to his ears, and he walked through the doorway of what, he saw later, was a dance hall—the Silver Queen. A redheaded young woman was playing a piano. Jeff leaned against the bar, ordered a beer, and listened to the first music he had heard for months.

Suddenly the redhead got up, walked over to Jeff, smiled and said, "Curiosity, stranger. Are you admiring the music—or me? And could you, by any chance be related to—"

A thin, tall, rather distinguished-looking man wearing a pearl gray Stetson came toward the bar. He said, "Good gosh, fellow! When did *you*—" He stopped, looked at Jeff who had turned to face him and added more quietly, "Sorry, mister. I thought—But you've got *two* eyes."

"Yes, Dollar, my darling husband," put in the redheaded lady. "This isn't One-Eye Gardner, the noble badman that once saved your scalp when a pair of Basque sheepherders were all set to carve you up into little pieces with their knives."

Jeff gripped his beer glass. He was looking at a gold-ringed moss agate which hung at the throat of the redhaired woman. He was looking at the moss design in that agate, a perfect heart. Remembering something Dave had said—

"I'm Dollar Dorn," said the dark man, extending his hand. "Maybe you're the brother One-Eye — excuse me — Dave Gardner told me about once. If you are, I'd like to shake hands with you—and set you up to a drink on the house."

"No more drinks, but—" Jeff extended

his own hand. "And now I'd like to know where your wife got the agate with the heart in it."

"From Mazie—the brunette beauty over there," said Mrs. Dorn. "Why?"

"Could I talk to her?" Jeff said, and his big hand was gripping around the beer glass again.

"Dave Gardner's brother can have any favor he asks for in this place," said Dollar Dorn. "Go get Mazie, Red."

IT was just before noon when Jeff Gardner, for the first time in a year, rode into Ox Yoke and tied his roan at the hitching rack in front of Baldy Rolfe's store. A store which small, shrewd-eyed little Doctor Darnell had just entered.

Jeff's spurs jingled across the porch. He stepped inside, and was greeted with the hostile gaze of Doc Darnell and Baldy Rolfe. It was paunchy, untidy Rolfe who rumbled, "I thought I told you to keep outa this place, Gardner!"

"If he'd keep clear out of town, people would like it better!" snapped Doc Darnell.

Jeff reached in the front of his gray flannel shirt, pulled two envelopes forth. One he tossed on the counter in front of Rolfe as he said, "Count the money in there. If it's two hundred dollars, sign the receipt for it. And here's one for you, Darnell. Three hundred. Money that Dave took away from you."

Two mouths dropped open. Then nervous fingers fumbled at envelopes. And while Dave, gray eyes narrowed, watched closely.

"Thuh—there's two hundred here, all right," Rolfe said.

"And three hundred here," said Doc Darnell nervously.

"Sign those receipts," Jeff ordered. "Then I'll get out of this unclean dump of a place—and stay out!"

Hard-gripped pencils scrawled signatures. Jeff stepped forward, picked up two receipts and walked out, leaving two men gawking after him.

Jeff rode down to the livery barn. The owner said that Tom Blair had gone home to dinner, and waved toward the old log house down on the bank of Prairie Creek, a broad stream fringed with cottonwoods.

Jeff's spurs jingled across the Blair porch. Trim, very neat and lovely-looking in an apron, Lorna Blair came to the door. Her deep blue eyes grew wide for an instant.

"Is your father here?" Jeff asked.

"Yes, said the girl, as if it were hard for her to speak. "Come in."

Jeff stepped inside and saw thin, tired-looking Tom Blair sitting down to the dinner table. The older man looked angrily at Jeff.

Blair kicked back his chair and said, "What do *you* want, Gardner?"

Jeff tossed another envelope on the table and said, "If there's twelve hundred dollars in there—the amount you claim Dave stole from you—sign that receipt."

A little gasp escaped Lorna's lips. Tom Blair stared dumbly at the envelope.

"Count that money," Jeff said.

BLAIR fumblingly obeyed, his calloused hands seeming to be all thumbs. Then he signed a receipt, handed it to Jeff and said, "I'm ever so much obliged, Jeff Gardner. But what brought about the change of heart? Why didn't you pay me this money a year ago—so I could've had—"

"I didn't have enough money to go around to you and Darnell and Rolfe a year ago," Jeff cut in. "I had to wait until I could double my money on a bunch of slabsided Texas steers, which I sold yesterday."

"What about Roland Stroud?" Lorna asked. "*He* lost three hundred of his own money to Dave Gardner—along with our twelve hundred."

"I'll see that coyote gets what's comin' to him," Jeff said. "Where is he?"

"Halter-breaking a bronc in his round corral up the crick there a little ways," Tom Blair said. "He'll be mighty glad to—"

"Will he?" Jeff said harshly, and was on his way out of the house. He leaped on his horse and rode off

A little later Jeff dismounted beside the corral where big Roland Stroud was yanking a hackamored bronc around. Stroud stopped his work, blinked pale blue eyes for a moment, then blurted, "What're *you* doin' here?"

"I paid Darnell and Rolfe and Blair what *Tom* owed 'em," Jeff said, climbing over the pole fence. "Now I aim to pay you off."

"My three hundred?" Stroud gulped, wiping beads of moisture off his forehead. "Well, this *is* a pleasant surprise! None of us figgered you'd ever kick through with the loot your dear, dyin' brother turned over to you!"

"I'm not aimin' to pay *you* off in money—loot or any other kind," Jeff said. His eyes were twin chips of steel, and now his fists were clenched as hard as rocks. "A dance hall girl from Sage City, a pretty brunette named Mazie, is goin' to help me settle up with you, Stroud! *You* remember Mazie?"

Stroud's lips twitched. His nostrils quivered. Suddenly hate flared in his pale eyes. He swore under his breath. Then he said, "You got a lucky punch in on me *once*, Gardner, but this time—"

Stroud, husky, formidable, was lunging at Jeff. And this time his big fist raked hide from Jeff's cheekbone. Jeff ducked clear of the next blow, a right that would have knocked him cold had it landed. Jeff's own right fist lanced out. Knuckles smashed to Stroud's twitching lips, lacerating them against the clenched teeth behind. Another blow, a hard left, smashed to Stroud's nose and backed him up for a step.

The tow-headed man swore again, more loudly this time, and rushed at Jeff. A punch, like a horse's kick, hammered to Jeff's ribs and knocked him off balance. Stroud tried to shoot over another blow to the face. But Jeff ducked this one, and smashed a savage blow to his opponent's midsection. Stroud grunted, rocked a little. Jeff smashed him again to the nose—and now Stroud's shirt front was a red mass.

Jeff heard a girl's voice crying, "Stop it! Stop it, you two!"

JEFF heard but he didn't heed those frantic words. Gripped in a vise of cold anger, he moved in on Stroud. His fists lanced out. His knuckles ripped at Stroud's dripping face, smashed to the bigger man's body. Stroud was groggy, but as furious as ever Time after time he rushed at Jeff, trying to land a mighty punch that would fell the lean man stalking him like a wolf. And each time he was jolted back on his boot heels by swift, vicious blows that he couldn't parry. Long pent-up fury went into every one of Jeff's blows.

At last Jeff said, "This one's for Dave, Mr. Stroud!"

A terrific right smashed to Stroud's face—and down he went.

"Good fighting, Jeff Gardner," said a quiet voice from the fence, "I've seen a lot of 'em, but I never saw a man hand out more punishment than you—and still let an enemy stand on his feet!"

Jeff turned slowly, looked at Dollar Dorn who was sitting in a new buggy, a buggy shared by his redheaded wife and a dark girl called Mazie

"Is this frightened-looking girl here Miss Blair?" called Mrs. Dorn blithely.

"What do *you* tinhorn sports care?" Lorna flared, tears in her eye.

"They're not the tinhorn kind—like your friend, Stroud," Jeff said flatly. "Mrs. Dorn has a little present to give you."

The redhaired woman proffered a little moss agate to Lorna, an agate with a heart design in it. Lorna stared for a long moment. Then she cried, "Where did you get *that*?"

"From Mazie here," said Mrs. Dorn, nodding at the brunette with the plumed hat. "*She* got it from the *gentleman* lying there in the corral—when he was putting on a celebration in Sage City—and after he'd sold some horses there."

"That's mine!" Lorna cried. "Roland

was going to have it mounted in that gold band for me!"

"He had it mounted, but not for you, it seems," said Dollar Dorn quietly. "He gave it to Mazie, and my wife bought it from her. Mr. Stroud also gave a lot of money to my faro dealer—and got shot by that same cool gentleman when he pulled a gun on him."

"I don't believe it!" Lorna cried. "Dave Gardner shot Roland—and robbed him when he was coming home from Sage City!"

"We'll see," said Jeff. "Stroud's waking up. Come in the corral, ladies. Let's see what Stroud says. See whether he'll be fool enough to try lyin' his way out of this mess!"

STROUD tried to lie, but he broke down when confronted by three citizens of Sage City. They tangled him up in his lies—and threatened to produce more witnesses.

Wretchedly then he mumbled the truth. He had blamed Dave Gardner for something the latter hadn't done.

"Thanks, Dollar Dorn, for drivin' all the way up here," Jeff said gratefully.

"Why not?" said the owner of the Silver Queen. "Dave Gardner saved my scalp once, didn't he?"

A sob burst from Lorna. She turned and stumbled toward the house where she and her father lived. She stumbled over a tree root, fell to her knees and Jeff said, "I'd better go lead her home, Dollar."

A little while later, in the Blair home, Tom Blair was saying, "Take back your money, Jeff. It ain't the Gardners that owe it. It's Stroud, the tricky—"

"Yes, take it, Jeff," Lorna said miserably. "We don't want your charity."

"I didn't think of it that way," he answered slowly, and twisted his dusty old hat between strong fingers. "I just wanted you and your dad to get another start. I'll sell you that little place of mine out there at Tall Grass Springs."

"Where are *you* going?" Lorna said quickly.

"Wherever he goes, your heart'll go with him," Tom Blair cut in. "Why don't you tell him the truth—like he's showed us the truth today? Why don't you tell him how I kept you away from Tall Grass Springs—while he was out there tryin' to square a debt the only way he could? Why don't you tell him that, even when you thought he was settin' himself up in the cattle business with loot money, you couldn't hate him like the rest of us blind fools did—not deep down in your heart!"

"Is that right, Lorna?" Jeff asked gently.

"Yes, Jeff Gardner—that's right," said the girl, and tears were shining on her lashes again.

"Would you like to move out to Tall Grass Springs—if we took your dad with us?" Jeff asked. "We could buy some cows and calves with twelve hundred dollars—"

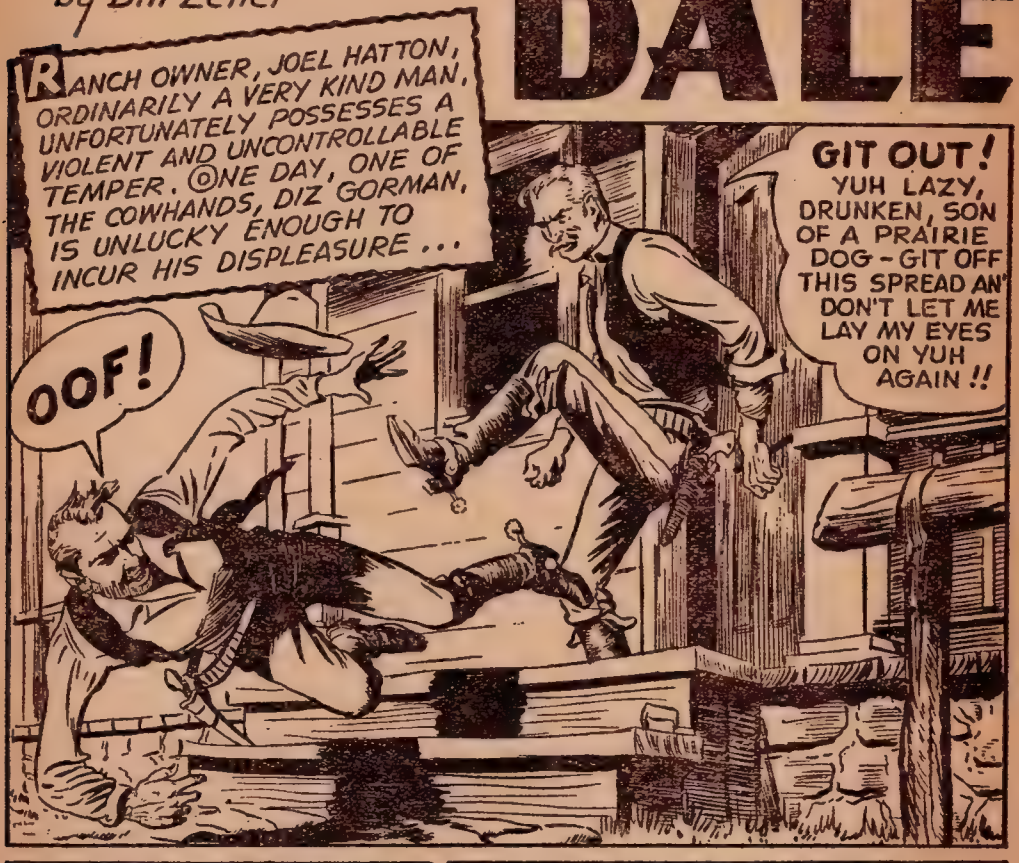
"Excuse me, kids," said Tom Blair huskily. "I'm goin' over to the livery barn—and quit my job. Which proves I ain't as blind *now* as I have been for the past year!"

He was gone. And Jeff was taking a girl in his arms. A girl whose warm smile, and lips, melted the barriers of misunderstanding; that buried the past as deep as the outlaw grave of a man entombed in a sidehill which overlooked the vast, rock-turreted sweep of the Sand Buttes badlands.

FIGHTING BOB DALE

in "THE OWLHOOT TRAIL"

by Bill Zeller


RANCH OWNER, JOEL HATTON, ORDINARILY A VERY KIND MAN, UNFORTUNATELY POSSESSES A VIOLENT AND UNCONTROLLABLE TEMPER. ONE DAY, ONE OF THE COWHANDS, DIZ GORMAN, IS UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO INCUR HIS DISPLEASURE ...
OOF!
GIT OUT! YUH LAZY, DRUNKEN, SON OF A PRAIRIE DOG - GIT OFF THIS SPREAD AN' DON'T LET ME LAY MY EYES ON YUH AGAIN !!

FAITH HATTON REMONSTRATES WITH HER ANGRY FATHER ...
DAD! DON'T LET YOUR TEMPER GET OUT OF CONTROL LIKE THAT. YOU'LL MAKE TOO MANY ENEMIES.
OH, DON'T WORRY, KITTEN. THE LESS WE SEE OF WORTHLESS VARMINTS LIKE THAT, THE BETTER.

THE NEXT DAY...

DAD, I'M GOING INTO TOWN. IF I STAY LATE, I'LL STAY OVERNIGHT WITH AUNT HATTIE.

ALL RIGHT, HONEY. GIVE HATTIE MY BEST.

FAITH DOES NOT RETURN, AND THAT NIGHT, WHEN THE RANCH IS DEEP IN SHADOWS AND SLUMBER, A FIGURE QUIETLY PILES BUNDLES OF BRUSHWOOD AGAINST THE HOUSE...

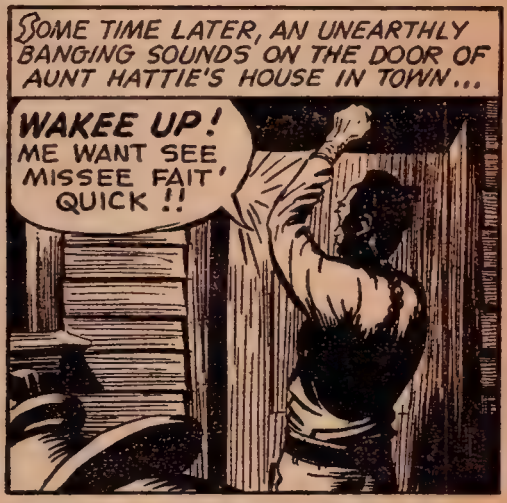
A QUICKLY APPLIED MATCH -- AND THE FLAMES ROAR UP...

AS RANCHER HATTON RUNS FROM THE BURNING HOUSE, A BULLET FROM THE DARKNESS DROPS HIM DEAD ON THE STEPS OF HIS HOME...

2

AS COWPOKES FROM THE BUNKHOUSE RUN UP AND FIND THE RANCHER'S BODY, MORE BULLETS FROM THE CLUMP OF COTTONWOODS CUT THEM DOWN TOO...
AGH!
ARRG!

SEEING WHAT IS HAPPENING, CHANG, THE CHINESE COOK, MOUNTS A HORSE BEHIND THE HOUSE...
ME GO QUICK - TELL MISSEE FAIT' -


SOME TIME LATER, AN UNEARTHLY BANGING SOUNDS ON THE DOOR OF AUNT HATTIE'S HOUSE IN TOWN...
WAKEE UP! ME WANT SEE MISSEE FAIT' QUICK !!

WHY, CHANG - WHAT'S THE MATTER ?
RANCH HOUSE BURN. YOUR FADDER, HE GET SHOT DEAD. COWHANDS KILLED TOO! ME COME HERE QUICK!
3

WHAT ? POOR DAD! I'M GOING RIGHT THERE! CHANG, YOU GO OVER AND TELL THE SHERIFF.

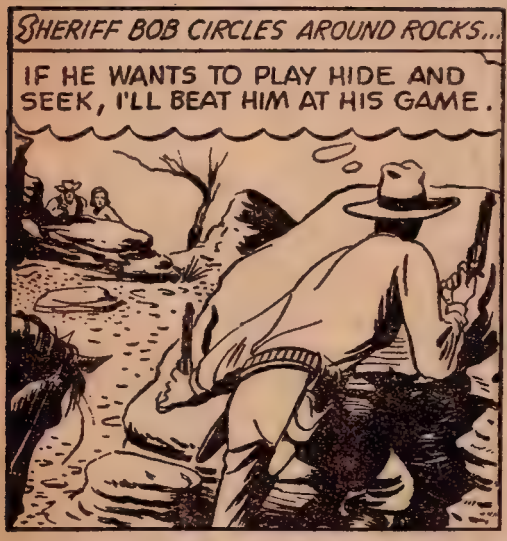
FAITH, YOU'D BETTER WAIT FOR SHERIFF BOB –
NO, AUNT HATTIE. I'M GETTING HOME FAST AS I CAN. THE SHERIFF WILL BE RIGHT BEHIND ME.
SUDDENLY, AS FAITH RIDES UNDER THE SPREADING BRANCHES OF A LARGE TREE, A FIGURE SWIFTLY DROPS UPON HER . . .
OHH!
AS DAWN IS BREAKING, FAITH HIGH-TAILS IT TO THE RANCH . . .
I WISH DAD COULD HAVE HELD HIS TEMPER. I WAS AFRAID SOMETHING LIKE THIS WOULD HAPPEN!
SHE IS DRAGGED TO THE GROUND . . .
SO IT'S YOU, DIZ GORMAN! TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF ME, YOU MURDERER!
YORE OLD MAN ALREADY PAID FER BOOTIN' ME. NOW IT'S YORE TURN–
4

MEANWHILE, CHANG THE COOK HAS ROUSED SHERIFF BOB DALE...
THAT GIRL SHOULD NEVER HAVE GONE THERE ALONE -
SHER
I'M RIDING AFTER HER. YOU GO OVER THERE AND WAKE MY TWO DEPUTIES. TELL THEM TO COME ALONG PRONTO.
OLD HATTON WASN'T A BAD SORT, BUT HE MADE LOTS OF ENEMIES. ANY ONE OF THEM COULD BE BEHIND THIS OUTRAGE--
HE REACHES THE OVERHANGING TREE...
SAY-! THAT'S THE GIRL'S HORSE, SHE MUST BE IN TROUBLE!
LOOKS LIKE SIGNS OF A STRUGGLE HERE. SHE'S BEEN CARRIED OFF -
5
THIS TRAIL UPHILL IS THE ONLY ONE LEADING OFF THE ROAD. I THINK I'LL FOLLOW IT AND SEE--

FURTHER UP THE TRAIL ...
LET ME GO, YOU FILTHY BEAST!
SHET UP!
YOU'VE HAD YOUR REVENGE, GORMAN. DAD'S DEAD. NOW PUT ME DOWN!
NOBODY TREATS ME LIKE A DOG. I'LL COLLECT WITH INTEREST.
IN DESPERATION, FAITH MANAGES TO DROP HER HAT ON THE TRAIL...
A LITTLE WHILE LATER ...
WHAT'S THIS-? THE GAL'S HAT!
GIDDAP, BEAUTY! THEY MUST BE RIGHT AHEAD-!
SOON HE CATCHES SIGHT OF HIS QUARRY ...
THERE THEY ARE! ONLY ONE VARMINT AND THE GAL-
6

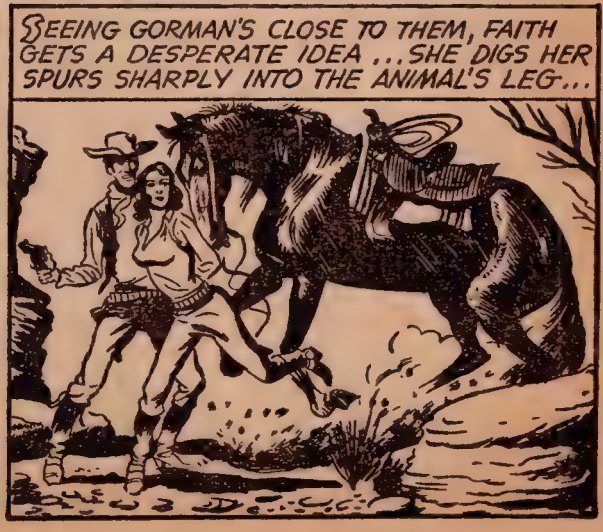
GORMAN, CATCHING SIGHT OF THE SHERIFF, DISMOUNTS AND TIES FAITH'S HANDS...
THIS'LL HOLD YUH TIL I GET RID OF THAT HOMBRE.

IT'S SHERIFF BOB DALE!
I'LL GIVE 'IM A TICKET FER BOOTHILL!


SHERIFF BOB CIRCLES AROUND ROCKS...
IF HE WANTS TO PLAY HIDE AND SEEK, I'LL BEAT HIM AT HIS GAME.

GORMAN USES FAITH AS A SHIELD...
OOH! LET ME GO!
EF HE WANTS TUH SHOOT IT OUT, YUH KIN CATCH HIS SLUGS.

GOTTA HOLD MY FIRE - CAN'T RISK HITTING THE GAL.
7


SEEING GORMAN'S CLOSE TO THEM, FAITH GETS A DESPERATE IDEA ...SHE DIGS HER SPURS SHARPLY INTO THE ANIMAL'S LEG...

THE HORSE JUMPS SUDDENLY AND BOWLS THEM OVER . .
AS FAITH SPRINGS OUT OF THE WAY, THE SHERIFF'S BULLET DRILLS GORMAN..
AGH!
BANG!
BANG!
YOU ALL RIGHT, MISS HATTON?
YES, SHERIFF, I'M SURE GLAD YOU FOLLOWED ME.
WITH THE DEAD MAN'S BODY, THEY PROCEED TO THE HATTON RANCH . .
SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT LAST NIGHT'S DOINGS ISN'T THIS ONE OF YOUR HANDS?
HE WAS, BUT DAD KICKED HIM OUT. HE MUST HAVE PUT FIRE TO THE HOUSE AND DRY-GULCHED DAD AND THE OTHERS.
AT THE RANCH, THE DEPUTIES ARRIVE ...
IT'S ALL OVER, BOYS. HERE'S THE VARMINT WHO DID IT, AND HE'S CARRION FOOD NOW.
THANKS FOR ALL YOU DID, SHERIFF.
ONLY MY DUTY, MISS. NOW THAT YOU'LL BE BOSS OF THIS SPREAD, I'LL DROP OVER OCCASIONALLY TO KEEP YOU COMPANY.

FIGHTING BOB'S IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

Hot-Lead Harvest

By HUMPHREY JONES

Illustrated by
Max Plaisted

TAD WINSLOW smelled trouble when he was still two miles from the farm. He was driving Temple Diamant home after the Saturday night dance in town, and the road to the Diamant ranch took the surrey within a mile of the Winslow place. The horse smelled it before he did, and tossed its head nervously in the traces. Then Tad got a whiff: it was smoke.

Tad turned to the girl beside him. "Do you smell that, Temple? That smells like timothy burning."

"Timothy?" The girl looked at him, alarmed. "There's only one place near here where there would be timothy."

"That's right—our barn." Tad's face was grim. He flicked the horse's rump with the whip. The Winslow farm was cut off from their view by a growth of woods along the road here. But further on, where the road turned off, they would be able to see.

When they got to the turn-off, they

The feud between the cattle men and the sodbusters broke into open fury with burnings and killings. Tad Winslow was in love with his arch enemy's daughter, and went through Hell to bring peace and justice to the land.

had already seen the glow over the tops of the trees. As the surrey raced down the long lane, the glow turned before their eyes into a sprouting mass of flame.

As the other man dismounted, Tad drew his .45 and fired into the brush.

"That's the barn!" Tad cried.

Then, as they came around the last bend, they saw that there were two huge blossoms of flame, instead of one

"Oh, Tad," Temple cried. "The house, too!"

Tad reined the horse to a stop and leaped to the ground. He could see that the barn was already gone. He raced toward the house and dashed in through the front door, shielding his face from the flames with his arms. Temple followed him and stood watching in horror.

In a couple of minutes Tad came stumbling out, coughing, his clothes smoking. In his arms he was dragging the body of an elderly man. Temple ran to help him.

"Your father—" she said, "is he—"

"He's dead," Tad said.

"Oh." Temple shuddered. "Burned?"

"No. Seems to have suffocated from the smoke. There's some blood on his head and a big lump, though. Looks like he either fell down and knocked himself out in there—or else somebody hit him and left him in there deliberately."

They laid the old man down on the ground gently, then turned to watch the buildings burn to the ground. In the barn, one of the horses was still screaming. But soon the noise stopped. The flames had reached the floors.

"Tad," Temple said, "you don't think it was the cattlemen that did this, do you?"

Tad didn't look at her. "Who else would it be?" he answered bitterly. "They've done everything they could to stop us, short of violence. Now it looks like they intend to drive us out even if it means murder."

Temple's dark eyes slowly filled with tears. Her father, Adam Diamant, was the biggest cattle-rancher in the valley, and he had fought the dirt-farmers ever since they had first started breaking sod here. It had been a see-saw battle, but a few of the settlers, like Tad Winslow and his father, had begun to get solidly established. When Temple, Adam Diamant's only daughter, had taken a liking to Tad Winslow, the sod-buster's son, Diamant had been furious. But the girl was of age, and he had not forbidden her to see whom she chose. Now, if it was going to be open warfare, though, things would be more difficult.

"I guess this just about puts an end to our plans," Tad said soberly. "I may as well tell you, I was going to ask you to marry me in October. Now we would not even have a place to live."

"Oh, Tad." Temple's lip was trembling. She put her head on his chest and clutched him tight. "I'm so terribly sorry."

It was a dismal drive the rest of the way to the Diamant ranch. Tad stared stonily ahead, and Temple clung to his arm in silence. When they finally reached the front gate of the ranch yard, Temple spoke.

"What are you going to do, Tad?"

"Move to the hotel in town, for the time being. After that, I don't know."

"Good night, Tad." She kissed him, and then holding her hand to her mouth to keep from crying, she ran for the house.

IN THE following week, Tad's room at the Riverview in Waterton became a gathering place for the nesters of the valley whenever they were in town. They all heard about the burning within a day or two, and the town buzzed with their excited and angry talk. On a Saturday when almost all the farmers were in for supplies, they held a meeting in the room.

Sheriff Tom Burgess came over and sat in to see what was in the wind. The nesters were seated around the room on chairs, on the bed, on the window sills, and standing against the walls. One of them, old Axel Kruger, harangued the sheriff.

"Everybody knows who's behind this burning and murder. Everybody knows that all these cattle ranchers are in this together. Yet you sit here in Waterton and do nothing! Who knows but he'll be

the next one? Who knows but he'll find his wife and kids burned alive when he goes home tonight?"

The sheriff arose and tried to pacify Kruger.

"Take it easy, now, men. There's no evidence that points to anyone. I'll admit it looks queer that both the house and the barn on the Winslow place caught fire. But there's no proof that a murder was committed!"

There was a low growling among the men.

"I tell you," shouted Kruger. "If the law can't protect us, we will protect ourselves. We will go armed, and God help any stranger caught sneaking around where he don't belong!"

The farmers chorused assent.

A lean, lanky settler from South Carolina spoke up.

"In spite o' what the sheriff says, I reckon we all know Winslow didn't die by accident. And I say the best way to stop this thing is to find out who killed him, and get justice."

"That's talking." Again the farmers voiced agreement.

"But we got our work to do. Who's goin' to run down this killer?" The farmers debated, but gradually their eyes all came to rest on Tad Winslow.

"That's my chore, I reckon," he said. "I guess I got reason enough."

The sheriff faced him sternly. "I warn you against takin' the law into your own hands, Tad."

"Don't worry, sheriff. I won't kill unless it's in self-defense."

The meeting broke up then, the heavy-booted men tramping out of the room, muttering angrily. Immediately after leaving the hotel a large group of them headed straight for the hardware store across the street to stock up on guns and ammunition. Some of them came out wearing new gunbelts, others carrying rifles or boxes of cartridges.

Inside the hotel room, Tad was left alone with his double burden: that of avenging his father's death, and that of finding a way to stop the depredations before more settlers were killed or driven out. His task would be a dangerous one, he knew, for the cattlemen would be keeping a special watch on him. Tad thought wistfully of Temple, and hoped that his search would not lead too close to the Diamant ranch.

RIDING out to the farm to look over the ground again, Tad searched the earth for clues. He had been out before, in the surrey, to see what he could salvage from the toolshed, which hadn't been harmed by the fire. There hadn't been much, besides an old saddle, which he was now using to ride instead of drive. At that time, he had seen nothing but a few hoof-prints, which told him little.

Now, however, he examined the hoof-marks more closely. Finally he discovered something which gave him a thrill of hope. A few of the prints were considerably larger than the others, pointing to an unusually large horse. Crouching down over the prints, Tad felt his muscles tense. If he could find the owner of the horse and bring him to quick justice, there was a chance of cutting off what could turn into a bloody range war.

Then Tad suddenly slumped, his shoulders drooping. There was only one horse in the valley this big—Adam Diamant's huge red stallion, Trumpeter!

"Adam Diamant!" he muttered. "Damn!" If he hunted Diamant down and caused his death or imprisonment, he knew Temple would come to hate him. For in spite of her disagreements with him, Temple loved her father fiercely, and would never believe him capable of crime. Tad suddenly wished he could forget the whole thing. But then he thought of the other nesters and knew he had no choice.

Tad climbed slowly into the saddle and sat lost in thought, his lean face grave. Then he drew out the new Colt Peacemaker .45 he had bought, and checked the load. He had only a little money in the bank, but he had bought the best

weapon for sale in Curt Hanson's hardware store. Satisfied, Tad slid the gun back in its holster, and headed out from the farm, toward the foothills.

Tad rode along at an easy lope, not in the direction of the Diamant ranch, but along the week-old trail of the horsemen who had ridden away from the farm. The hoofmarks of the big stallion were still distinct.

Knowing that the tracks must split up eventually, at the place where the ranchers had parted to ride to their own respective spreads, Tad wanted to see where they led to first. He was surprised when the trail led on mile after mile far back through the foothills and up toward the lake that had been formed between the hills by the dam the settlers had built three years ago. The tracks bunched up around the foot of the rock-and-log dam, some of them going up along the side of the hill above the lake some twenty feet higher. This dam had been one of the projects that had given the nesters a really firm foothold in the valley, enabling them to irrigate their crops. In the three years since it had been built, the water had backed up in the canyon behind it to a length of two miles, forming a large artificial lake out of which the water which was not allowed to spill down on the riverbed was ditched out to the farms along the valley bottom.

There was nothing out of order. He couldn't figure out what had brought the ranchers up here. It was an unlikely place to be holding a meeting, and the cowmen must have ridden for hours to get here. But Tad figured it would all come out in the wash when he got Adam Diamant in front of his gunsight and forced a confession out of him. Thinking of Diamant brought a torturing image of Temple, and his stomach sank at what he was being forced to do.

Dropping down through the foothills, Tad swung over to the Diamant ranch. He had no definite plan, except to hang about the place, trying to keep out of sight, until he either picked up some evidence that would convince the sheriff, or could catch Diamant or one of the other men at a disadvantage and force him to talk. It was now late afternoon, and would be dark enough before long so that he could slip in among the ranch buildings without being seen.

HE HAD ridden down into a draw between the hills about a mile above the ranchhouse, and dismounted to settle down and wait for darkness, when he heard the chopping sound made by the hoofs of another horse climbing up that way. Before he could ear him down, his horse let out a whicker. It was answered by the approaching rider's mount. Tad swore under his breath and drew his .45. This wasn't the way he had planned it, but maybe it would work out all right. The other rider was apparently alone.

After a moment's pause, the oncoming rider advanced at a faster pace, scrambling up through the loose stones and brush at the mouth of the draw, and shoving through the opening. Tad caught his breath.

"Temple!"

Temple Diamant looked at him standing there pointing the six-shooter at her. Tad glanced down at it, then slipped it back in the holster sheepishly.

"Tad! What're you doing up here—with a gun?"

Tad cast his eyes on the ground. "I'm sorry, Temple. But—I was following a trail from the farm. And this is where it brought me."

Temple's eyes widened in horror. "Tad—you think my father was in that burning!"

"I'm sorry, Temple."

"He wasn't, Tad. I know. I talked to him about it, and it couldn't have been him!"

"I don't know, Temple. Maybe not. But I've got to find out."

Temple was trembling. "But what are you doing up here by yourself, hiding around with a gun? If there's evidence, why isn't the sheriff or somebody with you?"

"The sheriff doesn't think—"

"And neither do I. Tad, you're taking justice into your own hands!"

Temple wheeled her horse around and pushed him back down the slope, breaking into a gallop in the direction of the ranchhouse.

"Temple!" He shouted after her, but she was gone. Tad leaned against his horse wearily, feeling helpless and frustrated by his inability to explain to her.

Tad wondered what she was going to do. Would she warn her father? He had not long to wonder, for a couple of minutes after he saw her ride up to the ranchhouse, he saw men running from the building toward the corral.

Tad climbed into the saddle hastily, alarmed. In another few minutes the riders would be here, surrounding him. He kicked the horse around and back up the other end of the draw, riding back into the foothills.

But he soon realized that he would lose. The horse was tired, and the others would overtake him. It was beginning to get dark, but even then they could fan out and find him by the sound of his horse's hoofs. Tad knew his only chance would be on foot. He slid down from the saddle, gave the horse a slap on the rump, and ducked into the brush. Free of its rider, the horse turned and headed for the ranch below.

TAD skulked in a gully, waiting for darkness to cover him. Soon it did, but not much later, he heard the sound of horses scrambling up through the stones below him, riders cursing. As he expected, they had fanned out. They must have found his horse, and were now beating the brush for him.

Tad lay down, hugging the earth, waiting for the riders to pass. He saw the vague shape of a mounted figure entering the depression which hid him. The horse labored straight toward him.

Tad moved to get out of the horse's way. There was a clatter as he dislodged a rock and a rustle as he threw himself back down in the brush. Then there was a lancing jet of flame and a sharp explosion as the rider drew his gun and fired at the noise. The bullet sang through the air and dug into the ground a foot from Tad's head. As he fired, the other man threw himself out of the saddle and ducked to the ground, coming after Tad on foot. It was too dark to see him now, but Tad drew his .45 and fired.

The other man returned the shot, again brushing Tad with the air fanned by his bullet. Tad could not see the man well, but could hear him stumbling about in the brush. Afraid of giving away his position by firing again, and of drawing the other searchers, he threw himself down toward the other man and sprang upon him, wrestling him for his gun.

The rider was heavy and powerful, his bulky frame half-again as large as Tad's slim body. Dropping his six-shooter, the man whirled, grappling with Tad.

Tad lashed out with his fist, feeling it smack into the man's face with a satisfying impact. But the other man came back quickly and charged him with a roar, swinging clubbed fists.

Tough and wiry as he was, Tad found his strength no match for the brutal weight of his opponent's blows. He heard the other man grunt with exertion and felt his own face go pulped and bloody under the hammer-like fists. He smashed at the man's mouth and chin and heard him gasp in pain. He braced his feet to follow up the advantage.

Lights suddenly exploded in Tad's brain, and before he lost consciousness, Tad felt the shocking pain of a clubbed gun-butt on his skull, striking him down from behind. The other riders had found him.

WHEN Tad's murky thoughts slowly assembled themselves into an awareness of existence again, he gradually realized that he was bound hand and foot. He was lying against a cool, damp surface that felt like clay. His head ached and throbbed agonizingly.

He forced his eyes open, but he could see nothing: it was still dark.

Struggling to a sitting position, and thrusting his legs out to feel, Tad felt himself to be in the corner of what seemed to be a square pit. Listening closely to the boards creaking, he realized that he was in the cellar of a house, most likely the Diamant ranchhouse.

After wrestling futilely with the ropes that cut into his wrists and ankles, he relaxed and lay back. He felt physically worn out. Since there was nothing else to do, he made himself as comfortable as he could on the cellar floor, and slept.

He was awakened by a sudden shaft of light which struck his eyes when the cellar door was opened, high over his head. Blinking to accustom his eyes to the light and trying to clear his head, he made out the figure of a girl in a dress standing at the top of the stairs.

"Tad?" It was Temple's voice calling, sounding sweet and full of concern. What now, he thought bitterly, after her betrayal of him last night. But he couldn't judge her too harshly. After all, she was Adam Diamant's daughter.

"Is that you, Temple?" he answered.

She came down the steps and over to him. He sat up.

"Get these damned ropes off me!" he said. In the light admitted by the open door, they could see each other's face. Temple suddenly touched his bruised cheekbone with cool fingers.

"Oh, you're hurt!"

"Well, what did you expect, after you sicced that army onto me?"

"They told me they weren't going to hurt you. I had to warn dad—you were looking for him with a gun!"

"Where are they now?" Tad asked, as she began working at the ropes.

"They all rode off a few minutes ago. I don't know where—they didn't tell me. All they told me was that I could find you down here if I wanted you."

His hands free, Tad chafed his raw hands and wrists, then bent down to untie his feet.

"Who all was there?"

"Dad and the hands here. And about a dozen of the other cattle ranchers."

"Armed, I suppose."

"Yes. Tad, you're not suspecting more things, are you?"

"Look, Temple. It's as plain as day. You know your father has always hated us nesters, has always used every means in his power to drive us out of the valley. It's been an obsession with him!"

"But I know he'd never kill!"

Tad sighed. It was no use arguing with her. She would always take her father's side.

"If they didn't tell you where they were going, was there any clue at all?"

Temple's delicate brow wrinkled as she frowned thoughtfully. "No-o. Somebody did say something about going after some dynamite."

"Dynamite!" Tad came erect with a snap.

"Why, what's the matter?"

Tad grabbed her arm. He saw the pieces go together with awful clarity. "Temple—do you know what that dynamite means? They're going to blow up the dam!"

"How do you know? They could use dynamite for lots of things." Yet her eyes widened as she got his meaning.

"Because I saw their tracks all around the dam! They were up there only a few days ago." Tad's voice was charged with consternation. "Temple, if they blow that dam, it'll let loose a wall of water twenty feet high. That whole lake up there'll come washing down over the valley bottom. It'll clean out every farm for a mile on each side of the river, and drown God knows how many!"

TEMPLE stared at him. Tad released her and ran for the steps. Outside, he looked around wildly. He saw his horse down in the corral, the saddle hung over the rail. But his gun had been lost in the scuffle last night. Temple followed him out of the cellar.

"Is there a gun in the house?" he asked her.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to stop those men before they blow the dam!"

"If you go with a gun, you'll just cause bloodshed!"

"Temple, if they see me first, they'll shoot and then ask questions. Don't you want me to even be able to defend myself? I promise you I won't shoot first, no matter what happens."

Temple regarded him out of troubled eyes, obviously torn by conflicting emotions. "All right," she said finally, and went into the house. She came out with a fancy pearl-handled .45 that looked as though it might be one her dad used for dress. But it was well-oiled, and worked all right. Tad filled it with cartridges from his gunbelt. Then he turned to Temple, taking her by the arms.

"I'm going after 'em. But in case I don't make it, I want you to ride down to the farms and warn the people."

"I'll do no such thing!" she said. "Those farmers are just spoiling for trouble. If they get aroused, they're likely to come riding out here and shoot every rancher on sight."

"I'm telling you, Temple. I can't hold those men long by myself. I'm sorry your dad is in this, but that doesn't change things."

Then Tad ran down to the corral and saddled his horse. He mounted and drove off toward the hills at a gallop. When he pounded out the yard gate, Temple was still standing looking after him, like a statue. She gave no indication of obeying his request. But he knew he had no time to warn the nesters himself. He'd have to let it go, and do the best he could by himself. He could do only what was humanly possible.

TAD pushed his mount as hard as it would go. Though the ranchers had a long head-start on him, it was unlikely they had ridden fast, and he might be able to reach the dam first by hard slogging. If he cut around a different way and beat them to the dam, there was a good chance he could surprise them there and spoil their plans. He could at least hold them up until they killed him. He had to do what he could.

His horse had broken into a lather that streamed down its sides, and its chest was heaving violently when Tad reined to a halt in a stand of timber just above the dam on the far side of the river. He had splashed across further down and come up here to avoid running into the band of ranchers.

There had been no explosion so far, but Tad had no way of knowing how much time he had. It had taken him over an hour of riding, alternately galloping and trotting, to get here. Having kept himself out of sight, he had not yet seen the others, either. Dropping from the saddle, he turned his horse loose in the clump of woods, letting the reins drag. Then he scrambled down the side of the hill toward the dam.

The hillside was heavily dotted with big boulders, so it was no trouble to dodge from one to another, keeping himself hidden. Tad worked himself down in this manner almost to the water's edge, where the dam adjoined the side of the mountain.

It was then that he saw the men on the other side. They were congregated in a group, about twenty of them, their horses in a bunch down on the trail below. It looked like they were figuring on getting out of there fast after lighting fuse on the dynamite. They could get up out of the riverbed and onto the hill to the left in a couple of minutes. From there, they would be able to watch the blast in safety.

Tad had no way of telling whether they had planted the dynamite yet or not. But from their leisurely manner, it was plain they had not yet lighted a fuse.

Careful to keep hidden, Tad worked his way down so he could see the slope of the dam. Scattered about at the foot of the log-and-stone structure, he saw the splintered remains of the dynamite boxes. Then the charge was planted! Tad wondered if he could somehow get at the dynamite. But they would be

sure to see him if he went down there, and he would be an easy target for their bullets. Lying there watching, Tad formed a plan. They would have to send a man down to light the fuse When they did, Tad might be able to surprise and overpower him In that case, he would have a hostage, and would be able to hold them off indefinitely.

TAD lay down to wait. He waited for what seemed a painfully long time. The ranchers were still standing up there palavering. They seemed to be in no hurry to get their business over and done with. Tad saw that a couple of the men were having some kind of an argument. Evidently over who would get the risky job of going down to light the fuse, from the gestures they were making. Tad could hear their words, but not clearly enough to make them out.

Tad looked for Adam Diamant, Temple's father. It wasn't hard to pick him out. He wasn't a large man, but he carried himself with a square erectness which marked him from the others. They were all wearing wide-brimmed hats, but Diamant's rocky face and prematurely white hair were visible beneath his pearl-gray Stetson. Tad hoped there would be no open clash between him and this man he had wanted for a father-in-law.

After an interminable length of time, one of the men apparently lost the argument, and started down the slope. Tad fingered the butt of the sixgun nervously. If he just shot the man in his tracks, it would slow the rest of them down. But he had promised Temple not to fire the first shot.

Hefting the gun in his hand, Tad waited until the man reached the foot of the dam. Then, keeping as close to the dam wall as he could to shield him from the sight of the ranchers on the other side, he stepped out from behind his rock and started running down toward the other man, brandishing the gun.

The man, one of Diamant's riders, did not see Tad till he was close, being intent on his task. But the sound of Tad's boots brought his eyes up sharply, as Tad ran across the footbridge over the stream.

"What the—" he began, as he saw the sixgun.

"Hoist 'em! High!" Tad commanded.

The other man slowly raised his hands. Behind him, Tad saw one of the ranchers step around the end of the dam and look after the man who had gone to light the fuse. He heard an oath of surprise, and the rancher was joined by several others. They stood looking down at him covering the cowhand with his gun. One or two drew their irons, but hesitated to shoot. A miss would mean the death of the man below.

One or two of the men, their guns drawn, started down toward them.

"Stay where you are!" Tad bellowed, waving the gun dangerously. He saw one of the men go back, disappearing from his sight above the dam. A moment later he reappeared, a rifle in his hands. While Tad watched, he raised the weapon and drew a bead. Tad felt cold sweat break out on him. It looked like they had him.

There was a crack and the sharp zing of the rifle bullet an inch from his head. At the same instant, the cowhand facing him suddenly dropped his hands and charged. Tad's shot ricocheted off a rock and the gun skitttered from his hand as the man locked with him.

Tad lashed at the man with his fist, feeling the impact jar his arm to the shoulder. The other man staggered back, but came on again before Tad could recover his gun.

They stood toe to toe and slugged it out. The opponent this time was not as big and heavy as the man he had fought the night before, but he still had the physical advantage. But Tad made up in fury what he lacked in weight.

The men above held their fire. It would be impossible for them to get a clear shot as long as the two were struggling so closely.

GRADUALLY, however, the other man began to get the best of it. Tad was weakened by his beating of the night before, his uncomfortable night in the cellar, the hard ride to the dam. He felt himself failing before blows that came with a vicious, persistent pounding. He felt his own knuckles give as he drove his fist to his opponent's head, and the next time he struck a stabbing, excruciating pain lanced up his arm.

The solidly-built cowhand pressed his advantage, clubbing Tad to his knees with swinging right-handed blows to the head. Then he brought his knee up viciously beneath Tad's chin, knocking him backward and bouncing his head on a rock. The cut from the pistol-blow of the night before reopened, and Tad felt consciousness start to recede. He lay, unable to get up.

The other man ran to pick up his gun, came over and brought the barrel down once, sharply, across Tad's brow. Tad slumped. He was almost unconscious, his sight swimming beyond control. But he saw the other man run to the dam, strike a match, and touch it to something that must be the dynamite fuse. Then he saw the man's wavering back receding as he fled up the slope.

Tad didn't know whether it was reality or delirium when the man suddenly disappeared from his blurred vision as though he had stepped into a hole or been wiped from the earth. But his ringing ears told him they also heard a shot.

Then there was a fusillade of shots, and the trail was suddenly filled with charging men on horseback, firing rifles and sixshooters. At their head rode a dark-haired girl in a cotton dress. The ranchers on foot scattered among the rocks as they returned the fire. The bunch of horses in the trail stampeded, running wildly off the trail, down toward the river. A huge red stallion reared among them.

In Tad's confused thoughts was a sudden stab of awareness. Those horses would be right in the path of the descending water when the dynamite went off. The realization shocked him back into a state nearer full consciousness. Agonizedly, he realized that he had to get to that dynamite fuse, cut it off, stop its malignant burning somehow.

He tried to move. His limbs seemed paralyzed, making no response to the commands of his will. He lay there for what seemed like minutes, impotently, while he heard the gun-battle raging above him.

Then slowly, he felt command of his limbs returning to him. He lifted a hand, then a knee, then rolled over painfully. He got up and staggered over to the dam wall, and leaned against it, weakly.

But where was the fuse? He still couldn't see clearly, couldn't think clearly enough to figure out where it would be. He sagged against the wall.

There was a lull in the roaring of the guns up above. Then his ears brought him the faint hissing sound. He followed the noise to its source, and found the burning fuse dangling from between two logs, scant inches from the charge cached inside.

Tad seized the fuse between two fingers, twisted at it. It was too tough to break.

Leaning down over it, Tad put the burning end in his mouth, bit down hard. Then he passed out.

WHEN Tad came to again, it was to the feel of cool fingers brushing a damp cloth over his brow. Without opening his eyes, he reached out his arm and took one of the hands in his.

"Temple," he murmured.

For answer he felt soft lips pressed down against his forehead.

"Temple," he breathed. "It was you who came, wasn't it? You did go after the farmers, didn't you?"

"Yes, Tad. I brought them. I realized that my father was wrong, that I couldn't shield him at the cost of other lives."

(*Continued on page* 111)

LARIAT LUCY

"LOOPING A KILLER"

by R. Morton

AT SHERIFF LANG'S HOME LUCY FINDS A PIECE OF PAPER.
DAD FORGOT TO TAKE KILLER BERT'S CONFESSION TO THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE--- I'D BETTER TAKE IT TO HIM.
WHILE, OUTSIDE THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, BERT'S GUN-MOLL, RUBY, LISTENS -----
I CAN'T INDICT BERT FOR MURDER WITHOUT CONFESSION, SHERIFF.--- HIS GIRL MAINTAINS THAT OLD BRANDER, THE HERMIT, GOT KILLED IN A FIGHT THAT STARTED WHEN SHE STOPPED AT HIS DOOR FOR A DRINK OF WATER AND HE INSULTED HER!
I MUST HAVE LEFT THE CONFESSION AT THE JAIL. --- JIM, WILL YOU GO AND GET IT FOR ME? --- HERE ARE THE KEYS.
---AND FOLLOWS JIM TO THE JAIL.
THAT'S FUNNY! I CAN'T FIND IT ANYWHERE!
PARDON ME MISTER! CAN I SPEAK TO YOU --- OOPS!-THERE GOES MY PURSE!
I'LL GET IT!
THAT'S RIGHT, MISTER ----

---YOU'LL GET IT--- RIGHT IN THE NECK!
AND NOW FOR THOSE KEYS!
QUICKLY RUBY FREES BERT ----
HERE'S HIS GUN, BERT---I'LL GET THE ONE I SAW IN THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE!
LET'S GET GOIN'! I'LL TAKE HIS HAT AND COAT TOO---MIGHT HELP ME GET OUT OF TOWN!
---AND A MINUTE LATER IN FRONT OF THE DROVER'S SALOON -----
I HOPE THE OWNERS OF THESE HORSES ENJOY A GOOD DRINK!
SAVE YOUR JOKES TILL WE GET OUT TO THE HERMIT'S SHACK AND GET THAT DOUGH WE COLLECTED AND HID!
DROVER'S
AS LUCY TURNS INTO THE MAIN ROAD--
THAT LOOKS LIKE JIM RIDING WITH A STRANGE GIRL --- I'M GOING TO FOLLOW AND SEE --- I'LL TAKE BERT'S CONFESSION TO DAD LATER!
---BERT AND RUBY ROUND THE BEND.
THERE'S SOMEBODY RIDIN' HELL-BENT AFTER US --- WE'D BETTER TURN UP INTO THOSE COTTONWOODS!
NEXT MINUTE
THEY'VE GONE INTO THOSE WOODS---I'M GOING TO SHOW JIM HE CAN'T GET AWAY WITH THIS AND BE ENGAGED TO ME!
2

SUDDENLY
ALL RIGHT, MISTER--- END OF THE TRAIL!
MY GOSH! IT'S A GAL!--- BETTER SEARCH HER, RUBY!
A MINUTE LATER
NO GUN, BUT--- HEY!--BERT, HERE'S THAT CONFESSION THE SHERIFF GOT FROM YOU LAST NIGHT!
WHO ARE YOU, SISTER? AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THIS?
SHERIFF LANG GETS IMPATIENT AND GOES TO THE JAIL ...
SHERIFF LANG IS MY DAD--- AND YOU'D BETTER LET ME GO!
HERES WHAT WE THINK OF SHERIFF'S FOLKS! LET'S SHOOT HER, BERT, AND BE GETTIN' ON!
NOT TILL WE GET OVER THE STATE LINE, RUBY. SHE'S OUR BEST INSURANCE THAT THEY WON'T SHOOT!
YOU SAY IT WAS BERT'S GAL?--- WELL, THEY'RE BOTH GONE NOW. WE'LL HAVE TO GET THEM BEFORE THEY GET TO THE STATE LINE!
LET'S GO!
A HALF HOUR LATER AT THE ROAD FORK
SAY! I JUST REMEMBER--- I LEFT THAT CONFESSION AT HOME --- I'D BETTER GO AND GET IT!
O.K. SHERIFF --- I'LL FOLLOW THESE FRESH HOOFPRINTS --- THEY MAY HAVE COME THIS WAY.
MEANWHILE---
BERT, I'M GETTIN' HUNGRY! YOU GO AND RUSTLE UP SOME CORN FROM SOME FIELD ---- I'LL WATCH THE SNOOPER!
O.K.
3

AS BERT SKULKS THROUGH THE CORNFIELD ---
---JIM FOLLOWS THE FRESH HOOFPRINTS.
THEY'VE LEFT THE ROAD AND HEADED TOWARD THOSE COTTONWOODS!
HERE COMES THAT HOMBRE I LEFT "OUT COLD" IN THE JAIL --- THIS TIME I'LL FINISH HIM!
YOU'D BETTER NOT SHOOT IT OUT WITH J -- HE'S THE HANDIEST MAN WITH SHOOTIN' IRONS IN THESE PARTS!
THANKS FOR THE TIP, SISTER. NOW HE'LL HAVE TO SHOOT THROUGH YOU TO GET ME!
NO HE WONT!
OUCH!
BANG!
YOUR TURN TO GO "OUT COLD" NOW, RUBY!
4

UP HERE, JIM, QUICK!
A MINUTE LATER---
HOW DID YOU GET HERE AND WHO TIED YOU UP?
NEVER MIND NOW--- HURRY! BERT WILL BE BACK SOON!
AND THERE HE IS!
AS BERT FIRES, LUCY BREAKS LOOSE---
---AND BEFORE HE CAN AIM AGAIN---
5

AS JIM GETS UP, RUBY, REVIVED BY THE SHOOTING, GRABS HER GUN AND JUMPS INTO THE BUSHES--
---AND THE NEXT INSTANT---
WITH TWO GUNS TO OUR ONE, WE'D BETTER TAKE COVER! OURSELVES!
BERT AND RUBY FIND THEIR HORSES.
LET'S VAMOOSE OUT OF HERE---BUT PRONTO!
A MINUTE LATER JIM AND LUCY RACE AFTER THEM.
HEARING THE SHOOTING, SHERIFF LANG TURNS BACK.
JIM MUST HAVE FOUND THOSE VARMINTS! HE WILL BE NEEDING HELP!

THEY'RE HEADED FOR THE HERMIT'S CABIN---WE'LL NEVER CATCH THEM!
LET'S CUT OVER THE BACK TRAIL ---- IT'S STEEP BUT SHORTER!
HERE'S WHERE I BURIED THE OLD GUY'S DOUGH---GET OUT AND SCOUT THAT ROAD AND LET ME KNOW AS SOON AS THEY GET IN SIGHT!
O.K. BERT!
YES, AND HERE THEY COME!
20 MINUTES LATER
WELL, WE GOT HERE BEFORE THEM!
I'M IN SIGHT RIGHT NOW MISTER--- REACH!
RUBY OVERHEARS.
YOU WERE RIGHT SMART TO STASH THAT HERMIT'S POKE, BERT—THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN SURE PROOF OF MURDER WHEN WE CAUGHT YOU.
YOU'LL BE CATCHIN' BULLETS NEXT!
7

AS RUBY RAISES HER GUN----
QUICKLY--- LUCY GOES INTO ACTION.
STARTLED AT THE UNEXPECTED SHOT, JIM GLANCES ASIDE --- AND BERT'S SIX-GUN ROARS----
AND MISSES--JUST AS SHERIFF LANG RIDES UP.
KILLERS ONLY GET ONE SHOT AT ME, BROTHER!
HE'LL LIVE --- AT LEAST TILL THEY BOTH STAND TRIAL FOR MURDER! AND, WITH THAT HERMIT'S POKE FOR A MOTIVE, IT'S A SURE CONVICTION!
IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR YOUR ROPE, RUBY WOULD HAVE GOTTEN ME!
NO GAL'S GOING TO GET YOU, HONEY,--- EXCEPT ME!

Renegade's Girl

By CLARK GRAY

Illustrated by William Meilink

SHE had spent the three nights screaming. Begging for mercy. Crying for death. But she was in her right mind now when she awoke and stared at Jack Healm out of eyes that were haunted by whatever awful thing had happened to her.

On the third day, the girl had come out of her delirium.

Jack Healm smiled as gently as he could. But he was not by nature a gentle man, and the three nights of watching, listening to her screams, waiting for the sounds to draw the Comanche out of the night, had rubbed the last softness out of him. He pulled the skillet from the coals, poured a little of the hot beef broth into his tin cup.

At the first shot from Jack's rifle, the renegade leader pitched to the ground.

"Better drink some more of this. You'll need your strength."

He squatted on his moccasins and watched her take the tin cup obediently. The girl's eyes, over the rim of the cup, searched him. Searched his gauntness, his whiskers, his red-rimmed, sleep-craved eyes. Jack Healm knew he looked like hell. He had not dared sleep during the last three days and nights. And his buckskins had shrunk when he carried the girl across the creek; they clung to him now like a second layer of skin. But he hoped he looked decent. He hoped he had a little honest decency left. Finally the girl set down the cup, and he saw her glance travel over his shoulder, where he had hung her dress upon a clump of sage to dry. He said hurriedly,

"You were bit by a rattlesnake, remember? You've been out of your head three days."

THE girl's lips made a round O of dismay, and it came to Jack, then, that she was beautiful. He had not thought of her looks at all before; she had been merely a human being in trouble, whose

Jack Healm found the girl on the trail, out of her head from a snakebite. He fixed that up only to find that a worse danger threatened her at the hands of the beastly renegades from whom she had escaped.

life he had to save But now he was aware of her red-gold hair that billowed in a flimsy cloud against his saddlebags that he had slipped under her head for a pillow. He noted with appreciation the sphericity of her under the blanket, and the slender whiteness of her naked arm and shoulder. Memory was returning to the girl. Jack saw the blanket move as she slipped her hand downward under it, feeling for the rough bandage he had put over the snake-bite, which was just above her knee He saw the pink flesh ride up her face, and he said harshly:

"Don't be a fool, girl You were in trouble. I was the only man in a hundred miles—leastwise the only white man. You can't be over-modest, and you got to do what I say Or we'll never get back to civilization alive. Understand?"

Slowly the girl nodded. Her red-gold hair moved in coils across the black leather of his saddlebags She looked at him with wonder in her eyes.

Jack Healm grinned He said, "Miss, I'm Jack Healm A trapper. I was on my way back to the mountains, after a rendezvous at St Louis, when I ran across you. You were out of your head, wanderin' around the buffalo wallows, screaming, with that snake-bite on your knee. The snake-bite's okay now. I doctored it. You ought not to walk yet for a couple days, but you ain't going to die. Unless," he added somberly, "the Injuns get us."

"Indians?" Horror flashed through her eyes. "I was captured by Indians."

"That's what I figured. Comanches?"

"Yes But they—they weren't Comanches, really. Not the men who—who kept me in their tepee They were white men, dressed like Comanches."

"Uh-huh. I figured that, too. The Comanches would never have let you escape alive. These renegades got drunk, huh? And you slipped out while they were drinking? Fighting, maybe?"

The girl nodded. "F-fighting over me. Look, Mr. Healm. Don't let them take me back! I'd—I'd die first! Don't let them take me! If you can't save me from them, give me a gun! Let me kill myself!" She was not far from hysteria, even now.

JACK HEALM knew she meant what she said. He knew that white women in the hands of renegades had every reason to prefer death to the degradation they endured in captivity It was white renegades who were responsible for most of the so-called Comanche raids on the communities of Texas and old Mexico White renegades who led the war parties, and took the major share of loot. Jack Healm scrubbed his fist wearily across his smoke-blackened, stubbled chin.

"You got relatives? If I can get you back?"

"My brother was killed in the raid. When they captured me But my pa lives in Missouri. He'd come get me. Can you —can you get me back?"

The eagerness in her was a pathetic thing for Jack Healm to watch, knowing as he did that the Comanche renegades were undoubtedly on her trail this very moment. But he nodded. She would need strength, he thought. Maybe hope would give her strength.

"I think so. But we've got to be careful. The damned Pawnee stole my pack mules—we'll have to ride my horse double, all the way back to Arkansas. And I had to build a fire to cook you that broth. If there's an Injun in fifty miles, he knows we're here. This is Osage hunting ground, too, and they're on the warpath against the Pawnee. They might not be too particular about just whose scalp they lift. It'll be tough, Miss, but with your help, we can make it."

"I'll help," the girl said eagerly. "I'll do anything. Anything, Mr. Healm!"

Jack grinned. "All right. First off, what's your name?"

The girl said, "Mary. Mary Howard." And she smiled.

It was hope that put the brilliance in her smile, Jack knew. But he felt the blood begin to pound in him, and he thought, *no wonder the damned rene-*

gades fought over her. The girl's a prize. He grunted,

"I haven't slept for three days—since I found you. I'm plumb bushed. I'll have to get a little rest before we shove off. Take my rifle and keep a look-out. It'll be up to you to protect our scalps till I wake up . . ."

SHADOW lay blue across the buffalo grass clumps and the purple sage when Jack Healm opened his eyes. The girl was shaking his shoulder. Jack rolled over on his side and took the rifle from her fingers, and he was instantly alert for trouble.

"All right. What do you see?"

"The crows." Mary Howard's voice shook with urgency. "See the crows in that tree? They don't act right."

Jack Healm squinted in the direction of her pointed finger. A tall cottonwood stood by the creekbank, and in that tree, some fifty crows were settling to roost. But they were not settling naturally. They were nervous, fluttery. Jack heard the warning caw of the sentinel crow, then, abruptly, the whole flock took wing and wheeled overhead, crying in alarm.

Jack dug his toes into the ground and screwed his body around till he faced the tree, belly flat. He eared the hammer of the rifle, and the little click sounded loud beneath the cawing of the crows, sending a bleak sense of satisfaction through him.

"Good girl. You'll do to ride the river with, Mary. They's Injuns down there, sure as I'm the son of an Irish mother."

He heard Mary Howard's sharp intake of breath, then she was quiet. Jack strained his eyes, searching the shadows along the creek bank. He could sense the life there. He could almost smell it. Mary Howard said in a cracked voice,

"If it's Comanches—give me your pistol. Let me have your pistol, please."

"Not yet," Jack Healm said. "We ain't sure it's Comanches. Besides, girl, you're so scared you couldn't hit a cow broadside."

The girl said tautly, "I could hit what I needed to hit."

Jack Healm ignored that. He was watching a thicket of buckbrush clustered under a sycamore tree, with the first pinkish berries just beginning to form. Against the buckbrush, he thought he saw a dark head. He squinted, putting his hand against his face to shade out the sun. It was a head. He recognized, then, that the head had a shaved scalp, with a roach down the middle, drawn back into pigtails. He grunted, and the tension slithered away.

"Osages. Osages, Mary. Maybe you won't need the pistol now."

Mary Howard let a long sigh quaver out of her. She breathed, "Thank heaven! They're friendly, aren't they?"

"Uh-huh. If they don't take us for Pawnee."

Jack Healm took his pistol out of his belt and cocked it and laid it beside Mary. He handed her his rifle. Then he raised slowly to his feet, one hand overhead in the universal gesture of peace.

Nothing happened for a moment, and he felt tension flicker up and down his leg muscles. Then the buckbrush parted and he saw the tall, blanketed form of an Osage *partisan* advancing. The warchief had one bronzed arm and shoulder outside the blanket, lifted high.

Jack Healm grunted in relief. Then, as the Osage came nearer, Jack squinted hard in sudden amazement, recognizing the man. He felt himself grin. He felt a sudden surge of joy. He shouted,

"Baldy! Baldy, you old son of an eagle! It's me! Jack Healm!"

BALDY JONES. That's what they'd called the Indian at Harmony Mission, back in Arkansas. Baldy Jones had been a rag-tag little boy when Jack had known him, completely bald after an attack of scarlet fever. His parents had died from the disease, and the Osage agent had sent the young orphan to Harmony, the school maintained by the government and the churches to educate the

Osages. Jack, himself, had lived on a nearby farm and attended classes with Baldy.

Baldy's real name was Chabe Chinka, Little Beaver. Baldy had returned to the tribe, when he finished school, and Jack Healm had not seen or heard from him since.

Baldy Jones, or Chabe Chinka, advanced slowly, not forgetting for an instant that he was a *partisan*. His coppery, painted face broke into only the slightest of smiles. He kept moving forward, erect as an arrow under his blanket, until he reached the campfire. Then he lowered his arms, grinned, and offered a handshake, white man fashion. At least, he was friendly.

"Hello, Jack. We thought you might be Pawnee."

Baldy Jones' grin was a strange grimace, almost frightening under the paint that streaked his features. Baldy carried the *baton croche*—the curved stick ornamented with swansdown, bells and eagle feathers that was the ensign of the Osage warriors. To all appearances, Baldy had forsaken his white training; even his English had a rusty, guttural sound.

Jack Healm said, "Baldy, have you seen Comanche track?"

"Yes. Pawnee *and* Comanche." Baldy Jones turned to signal his Osages. "We have three Comanche white men traveling with us. Why?"

Jack Healm felt a grunt slip past his lips, and suddenly the tension was back with him again, and sweat popped out along his sides, sliding down the impenetrable inner surface of his buckskins. He glanced quickly at the girl, stilll lying under her blanket. Her eyes hung on his face. She was white to the lips. It came to Jack then that maybe he was a fool, risking his life for Mary Howard. Other white men would not be so generous. After all, so far as the civilized world knew, she had disappeared into the hands of the Comanche. Why not let her stay there, Jack thought? But he shook the idea away and said grimly to Baldy Jones,

"The girl escaped from those Comanche renegades. Baldy, can you give us escort back to the Nations?"

"No." Baldy Jones answered instantly. "I cannot do that, Jack. My nation trades with the Comanche on the Salt Plains. We are their friends. We do not deal in captives, but—no, Jack—I cannot help you."

The other Osages were approaching now. Eight or ten of them, Jack saw, with two of their number leading the horses. Trailing them came the three white men, dressed in typical Comanche garb. Blankets, half red and half white, thrown back against the heat of evening. Skin loin cloths. Necklaces of silver and glass. And hair worn long and braided into tresses on the neck. They looked Indian at a distance, but they were white. Jack could see the hair on their chests, the black, unshaven whiskers. And Indians had no whiskers.

Jack Healm scrubbed a fist across his own grimy whiskers, feeling a moment of bleak despair. It had been a blind hope, of course, that he could get help from Baldy Jones. He had known that the Osages earned a small fortune every year by trading guns, blankets, coffee, and other trader's items to the Comanches in exchange for stolen horses and mules. Baldy Jones would be a fool to anger his customers, and Baldy was quite evidently not a fool.

Jack glanced once again at the girl, Mary Howard. He was just in time to see her hand slip back under the blanket, carrying his pistol that he had laid at her side. Her eyes were stretching in their sockets. There was panic in her, and Jack saw the muzzle of the pistol moving upward under the blanket. Upward, toward her breast.

JACK lunged forward, cursing himself for a fool at leaving the girl that pistol. He yanked the blanket from her, revealing her slim white legs, her long

arms, her body clad in the flimsiest chemisette. The pistol was motionless in her hands now, its muzzle resting against the chemisette. The girl had her eyes closed, her breasts heaving with the agony of her decision, her fingers clenched white around the trigger guard. Jack yanked the pistol from her, not quick enough to keep her from firing. The gunshot echoed against the creekbank, and Jack vaguely heard the flock of crows rise crying in alarm. The bullet from the pistol plowed dirt six inches from Mary Howard's side.

Jack croaked savagely, "Not yet, damn it, girl. Don't give up yet."

And then a voice behind him cried out, "That's her, Morgan. That's the little wench."

Jack Healm straightened very slowly. Moving his hands with utmost care, he shoved the pistol back in his belt. He kicked the blanket with his foot, bringing it to the girl's side, where she grasped it eagerly and covered herself. Jack had time to notice irrelevantly that the panic

Jack yanked the pistol from her and her self-intended shot went wild.

had somehow left Mary Howard. Her eyes were calm now, with the calm a man has when he has faced death, and it has failed to strike. Jack picked up his rifle and then turned carefully around, his glance sweeping the little group before him.

The three white men faced him across the smouldering campfire, with the cluster of Osages behind. One of the white men had sandy hair, and blue eyes, and tobacco-stained teeth that showed huge gaps where some were missing. Another had a scar that twisted its way like a white snake among his black whiskers. The third was pitted by smallpox scars, a little man, with cruelty written in every line of a hatchet face. They were a trio of prize ruffians.

Jack Healm said, "Gentlemen, let's understand each other. You're trailing this girl. You want to take her back to your Comanche wigwams. She doesn't want to go. But you can take her. All you've got to do is kill me, first."

The little man with the smallpox scars was evidently the leader. He had a rifle in the crook of his arm, but he made no move to lift it. He said,

"Mister, I don't know who you are. But the girl is mine. I had her once, and I'll have her again."

Jack Healm said gently, "All right. Start shooting. Maybe I can't kill more than two of you before you gun me down. Try it, and we'll find out." His voice was calm and cold.

The three white men exchanged uneasy glances. The little leader shot a quick look at Baldy Jones, Chabe Chinka. Baldy stood to one side of the fire, inscrutable as an Indian can be. He might have been carved of wood, for all the emotion his face showed, but Jack Healm knew there was conflict in the Osage leader. And the three white men knew it. The Osages were not a captive-taking tribe. True, they were friendly to the Comanches, but friendship among the Indian nations was an unstable thing at best, subject to whim, to a chance misunderstanding. The three renegades dared not ask too much of Osage friendship.

The hatchet-faced man with the smallpox scars blinked rapidly, then shrugged.

"You can have a while to think it over, Mister. We'll make camp. Might as well have a good feed before we kill you."

JACK HEALM sat cross-legged on the ground beside Mary Howard, the rifle cradled across his knees. He watched the three renegades draw off a little toward the creek and build their fire. The Osages, on guttural orders from Baldy Jones, remained squatting around the embers of Jack's fire, munching their cold warparty rations.

The girl, Mary Howard, put a white arm on Jack Healm's knee. Her eyes were grave.

"Look, Mr. Healm. You don't need to die for me. I—I thank you for it, but it wouldn't do any good. Just—just go away and—"

Jack interrupted savagely, "Shut up! Shut up, and let me think! Nobody's going to die, Mary. At least, not one of us."

He was desperately stoking the fires of his brain, piecing together everything he knew about the Osages and the Comanches, trying somewhere to find an answer to this problem that seemed unanswerable. There had to be a way out, he told himself. There had to be a way he could get help from Baldy Jones. There had to be a way he could make the Osages *want* to help him.

Then suddenly the idea came, and he had his answer. He grunted, and he had a moment to feel a little shame that the trick he had thought of was a white man's trick, a trick that would never have occurred to an Indian. But it would work. And it would appeal to the Osages. Jack Healm glanced once at the three renegades, saw that they were busy around their own campfire, and decided that they would not make trouble before they had sounded out Baldy Jones.

Jack grinned a small grin to himself

and got to his feet and approached Baldy. Dusk had fallen, and the coals cast orange light upward on Baldy Jones' painted features as the *partisan* squatted before the fire, chewing a piece of jerked buffalo meat Jack hunkered beside the Indian.

"Baldy, you're hunting Pawnee. Right?"

Baldy Jones turned a pair of black, beady eyes Eyes that were inscrutable. Baldy said,

"Sure, Jack. We Osages are always after Pawnee scalp You know that."

"Un-huh. Baldy, you don't think much of this captive business, do you?"

"No. It is not the way of my people. But the Comanche are our friends and customers, Jack They can read sign. They would know what happened if I helped you kill these three whites."

"Sure. But what if the sign said that Pawnee killed the three?"

Baldy Jones stopped chewing. His black eyes began to shine like glass. A little flicker of flame came to life in the campfire, throwing Baldy's streaked warpaint into sudden savage color. Jack Healm said hurriedly,

"It'd be easy, Baldy How do you recognize Pawnee track? By the way the moccasin strings are tied under the instep. That's the way any tracker knows Pawnee. All you've got to do is order your braves to tie their moccasins under the instep, Pawnee style. Then you can help me kill these three renegades. After that, you can cover the tracks you made coming up to this campfire. Then you can ride off till you hit Pawnee trail, blend your own track with it, and disappear up some creek. The sign would all show that Pawnee had done the killing. And the Pawnee are your enemies, Baldy."

IT WAS not, Jack thought, as treacherous as it sounded The Pawnee were a horse-stealing tribe of Indians, night raiders, who remained hidden mostly by day. Besides, they roamed a territory that was seldom crossed by the Comanche. It was highly unlikely that the vengeance-seeking Comanches would ever come in contact with the Pawnee. And if they did, the Pawnee would run instead of fighting.

Baldy Jones swallowed the last of his buffalo meat. Without another glance at Jack Healm, Baldy produced a pipe, stuffed it, lit it with a glowing coal. When he had the pipe going, he grunted a command. The other Indians turned black eyes on Baldy, then squatted quietly before the fire. Baldy began to talk, slowly and musically in Osage.

Jack Healm understood very little Osage. At first, he tried to follow the sonorous roll of Baldy's speech, but he could not. However, he gathered that Baldy was explaining the plan, asking for approval. He was explaining his reasons to the tribesmen.

It was the custom around the council fire for each warrior to have his chance to speak, uninterrupted. A *partisan* had a certain amount of authority, but he could not order his braves into a battle they did not like. When Baldy finished, Jack Healm searched the black-eyed circle of warriors, and his heart went to his stomach when he found no approval of Baldy's words.

A warrior rose slowly to his feet. An old warrior, with white hair streaking his roach. The old man spoke, and anger was in his tones. Jack caught a few words. Treachery. Peace. White man's guns. Too dangerous. Jack slipped to his feet and left the fire, biting his lip.

The debate, he knew, would go for an hour, until each man had spoken at length. He crossed through the darkness to where Mary Howard lay beneath her blanket. Her face was a white blur against the ground.

Jack said, "Mary?"

"Yes, Jack." A white arm appeared at the edge of the blanket. Her hand fumbled till it found his knee.

"Mary, I'm going to make a stab at getting us out of here. I'll need the rifle

and pistol. But I'm going to leave you my skinning knife."

"All right, Jack." She lay utterly still, then, and it came to Jack that she was not afraid any more. Mary Howard had fought her fight with fear, and won. He could depend on her now. He felt his own lips flatten against his teeth, and grimly he slipped out his knife, put it in her hand. He curled her fingers around the handle of the knife and squeezed gently. That was all. That was goodbye. Then he rose and glided off toward the flames of the renegades' campfire.

Like most white men, the three renegades had built far too big a fire. Its flames lit a garish circle on the side of the hill. The three had cooked a stew of some sort and were squatted lazily around the fire, wolfing it down. Jack saw the upraised flashes of a whiskey bottle as the hatchet-faced leader downed a drink. Jack grinned thinly. He wormed into a cluster of buckbrush, thirty yards from the white men's fire, and then he shouted,

"Start shooting, gentlemen. I'll give you five minutes to start shooting—or to ride out of here, alone."

HIS plan, if it could be called a plan, was simple. If he could, he'd scare the renegades away. But he didn't think he could. He thought they'd fight. And when they began to fight, he hoped that Baldy Jones and his Osages would come to his assistance. Even so, he could not be sure they would.

That was all. He hoped that the native decency of the Osages would come to the surface. He didn't know that it would. He just hoped it.

The three white men froze into position around the campfire, becoming statues. The little leader had the whiskey bottle halfway down from his lips; he didn't lower his arm. Jack Healm sensed a sudden silence among the Osages, behind him. Baldy Jones said something in a low, guttural voice. Then hell descended out of the skies and Jack Healm was suddenly in the middle of a maelstrom of madness.

Shooting as they went, the three renegades were gliding out of the circle of firelight. Lead whined through the night. Jack shot once with his rifle, saw the renegade leader stumble and pitch forward on his face. Behind him, he heard the whisper of moccasins on hard packed earth.

Jack knew about gunfights. In a gunfight, no man has time to think. He turns his instincts loose, and some lower jungle element of him takes control. He becomes less than a man. And more of a beast. It was that way now. Jack had only a vague consciousness of what was happening. He knew he had flung his rifle aside and was snaking, weaving forward. Firing his pistol at any shadow in the night that might be the two remaining renegades. Death whispered around him, and he knew it, knew he might die at any moment, but that was not the important thing. The important thing was to kill the renegades. Kill all of them.

Then something struck him from behind. He had vaguely time to know it was the blunt side of a war hatchet, that the white men would not have used a hatchet, but a gun. Then the night tilted sideways, and he was down on the earth, and the night swooped blackly in upon him, swallowing his senses in darkness.

HE OPENED his eyes and saw that somebody had laid a few twigs on his campfire. The little twigs were flaming. He could see quite clearly the sober, conferring group of Osages. Something soft was under his head. Mary Howard moved, and he knew then that his head was in her lap. He looked up at her. She was crying. Crying with joy.

"You've saved us," Mary Howard said softly. "They're dead. All those horrible men are dead."

Jack Healm blinked, not understanding. He had not killed the three renegades —not all of them, anyway. He glanced once more at the Osages, and wonder-

ment rose in him. The Osages, he saw, had tied their moccasin strings under the instep.

Baldy Jones left his warriors and circled the campfire, bending over Jack's head.

"So. You're awake. I had to hit you, Jack. You got in the way. We're leaving now. We've got some tracks to make."

Jack Healm said, "Baldy. You—you did what I asked. You—" His voice cracked.

"I went to a white man's school," Baldy Jones said quietly. "The white men fed me when I was hungry, and gave me clothes, and taught me to be clean. I owe a few things to the white race, Jack."

Jack said, stirred by a nameless, wondering gratitude. "We won't forget this, Baldy."

"You'd better forget it," Baldy Jones said grimly. "It was the Pawnee who helped you, Jack. Remember that."

Jack managed a faint grin, then. "All right. You'd better leave me the renegades' horses. You wouldn't want to be found with them."

Baldy Jones nodded, then made a gesture to his braves, and without another word, the group stalked out of the light. Jack heard the stamp of horses, then rapid hoofbeats, and he was alone with Mary Howard.

Mary Howard said, "Jack—I—I'd do anything for you, Jack."

"You would?" Jack climbed slowly to his feet, but the wound on the back of his head sent pain reeling through him, and he sat down groggily beside Mary. He grinned.

"You would? Well, Mary, you can ride with me back to Arkansas. That'll put you back in civilization, and you can go home. But we won't start till morning, Mary. We'll be safe here. We can relax a little."

Mary Howard said, "Yes, Jack." She pulled his head toward her, and she kissed him. Her lips were soft, and Jack Healm, knowing he was only a rough grizzled mountain trapper, thought that he had never seen a woman so beautiful, or so desirable.

Mary Howard said, "Yes, Jack. We'll be safe here now."

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GALLOWS BAIT

IKE MILLER, proprietor of the Red Gulch general store, was going through a weekly routine. He was counting up the total take of the week which he always kept in the store until closing time Saturday night.

Ike believed the last possible customer had come and gone. John Brady, last of all, had bought some 10-gauge shotgun shells, saying he was planning on knocking over a couple of jackrabbits early Monday. Ike knew John Brady, dark, solemn and dignified, wouldn't go after jacks on Sunday.

John Brady did some deaconing at the little church every Sunday. He took pride in passing the collection basket. John wasn't yet twenty-five, but he looked and acted forty.

John had been gone half an hour when Ike Miller finished separating gold, silver, and some folding money. It added up to more than $1,200.

Ike heard the step behind him. He swore silently. He had forgotten to lock the door. His rule was never to sell goods after ten o'clock Saturday night.

Ike turned. He was looking into the hole of a .45. The gun was in the hand of a heavily masked man wearing rough levis, a blue wool shirt, and worn riding boots.

"What's—what's this?" gasped Ike.

"Yuh kin shove that dinero over the counter!" rasped a strangely hoarse voice. "An' don't waste no time. If anybody happens along an' yuh try anything, yuh git it in the guts."

Ike tried desperately to recall if he had ever heard that voice. But its hoarseness concealed any identity there might have been. Ike was convinced this must be some wandering pilgrim, for there hadn't been a holdup or robbery in Red Gulch for many months.

A few shoot-outs at the Fairplay Saloon had been the sum total of crime in Red Gulch.

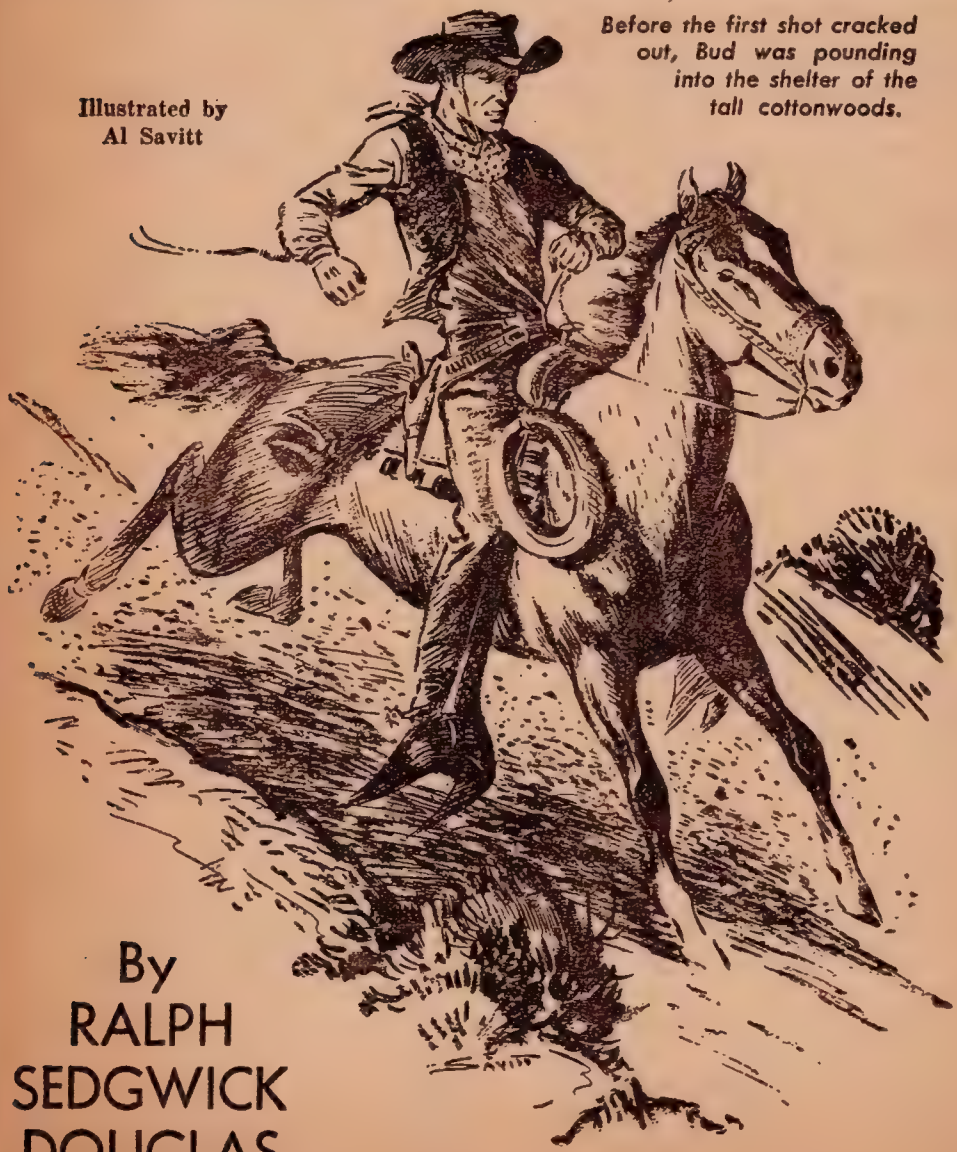
Carrying a lot of dinero, the possession of which he could not explain, just at the time of a wave of brutal robberies, boded ill for Bud Brady. But, conscious of his innocence, Bud wouldn't take back-talk from any man.

"Shake it up, mister!" growled the holdup through his black cloth mask. "I ain't got all night!"

Ike groaned and swept some of the money together. He leaned over to put it on the counter. The holdup lifted the gun and brought the barrel down with bone-crushing force on Ike Miller's head.

IKE was still unconscious when Marshal Rudd noticed his open store door an hour later. Doc Slater could not deter-

Illustrated by Al Savitt



Before the first shot cracked out, Bud was pounding into the shelter of the tall cottonwoods.

By RALPH SEDGWICK DOUGLAS

mine quickly whether Ike was suffering from concussion or a fractured skull.

Marshal Rudd did not have to guess about a holdup. Only a few small coins lay on the floor where the thief had gathered in the week's money.

Among the hellers of Red Gulch there was no wilder kid than Bud Brady. He was a leader in raising a ruckus. He was always the first one at a game table when he came in with a drive. He gathered and brought in market herds for small ranchers and he earned his money. But it never lasted more than a few hours.

Bud was the black sheep of the Brady family. Andrew Brady, his father, was an upright man with perhaps one ingrained fault. Andrew Brady nursed a grudge, a lifetime hate for Tom Potter of the Circle-C spread. The bloodless, silent feud had lasted so many years that probably Andrew had forgotten what the quarrel had been about.

Bud had two older maiden sisters, rather plain and very prim.

Bud's helling around in Red Gulch was enough for the whole family. It rubbed his brother, John Brady's, hide raw. John Brady was building up a fair mortgage loan business and hoped some day to become a real banker. He kept house behind his loan office.

This was Bud Brady's rating the night Ike Miller was slugged and robbed. Bud had nearly lost his shirt in a game late Saturday afternoon after bringing in a herd. He had left the saloon, his blond hair rumpled, and his face flushed with too much redeye.

It was about one o'clock Sunday morning when Bud Brady again entered the Fairplay. He was not drunk now. He had a cleft in his chin that made him look boyish when he grinned and he was grinning now.

Bud fished out some money and put a five-dollar goldpiece on the bar. His brother, John, who cautiously took only two small whiskies as a nightcap for his daily quota, scowled at him from the other end of the bar.

"'Lo, Johnny!" called out Bud. "How about loosening up yore unmoral scruples an' wettin' yore gizzard with an extry one on me? I'm celebratin' a bit o' luck."

Bud fully expected a tart reply from his brother. But the sudden freezing of all conversation in the room settled around him like an icy chill. Bud glanced around.

It seemed that the eyes of a hundred or more hombres were boring into him. They were taking in his worn levis, his blue wool shirt, and his scuffed riding boots.

Marshal Rudd was in the saloon. Ike Miller had recovered consciousness about an hour before. The evidence appeared to be cut and dried.

EARLY that evening Bud Brady had been flat broke. In the meantime Ike Miller had been robbed. Bud had been missing. If any hombre there had been interested, it might have been noted that Bud Brady had been absent from the Fairplay Saloon and from Red Gulch during several past Saturday nights.

But it seemed there was nobody here now to recall that.

"Great catamounts!" exclaimed Bud. "What's chewin' at yore minds? Yuh look as if yuh think I'd dry-gulched somebody!"

"Maybe it's the next thing to it," intoned the solemn voice of dignified John Brady. "Whatever comes o' it, I'm here an' now disownin' you as any brother of mine."

"That makes everything fine, brother John," grinned Bud.

"It ain't so fine," rasped Marshal Rudd, pushing his broad figure through the men nearest Bud. "I'm askin' yuh where you've been for the past six hours? An' also where yuh picked up the dinero you're so willin' to spend?"

"Neither one o' which is any o' yore damn' business!"

If Marshal Rudd had been a little smarter in the head, he would have realized a guilty man is not often so defiant especially when he is sober, and Bud was sober.

In addition to lacking a lot of smartness, Marshal Rudd had little control of his own temper

"I'm makin' it my damn' business," he roared. "Yuh got that money when you cracked Ike Miller's head with your gun-barrel and left him for dead. Yuh didn't think he'd ever live to describe the hold-up man who robbed him."

Bud drew in a long breath. "Ike Miller robbed?" he questioned.

"Don't try pullin' that stuff on me," said the marshal harshly. "Lemme see your six-gun."

There was no particular reason why Bud Brady should not have shown Marshal Rudd his .45, except he had the sudden notion that he might have need for the iron before he got out of this corner. It was news to Bud that Ike Miller had been robbed.

He repeated, "I'm sayin' it's still none of yore business where I've been or where I got this money, an' I'm not handin' over my gun."

Marshal Rudd had always depended on his size and bluff, seeing that he weighed nearly 200 pounds, none of which was fat. It nearly always got him by. Bud Brady scaled around 160. The marshal's hand dropped to the butt of his gun. Bud had long been a heller. He had been in many a ruckus. He had his own reasons for not talking about the money he had or where he had been. But once in Marshal Rudd's jail, he would have to bring out things that he had pledged himself to keep secret.

So as Marshal Rudd's hand went down to his gun, Bud Brady's left fist came up. It was as neat and stiff an uppercut as ever caught a man squarely on the point of the jaw.

Marshal Rudd dropped. Two other men tried to block Bud. He removed them with rights and lefts.

"Stop him!" shouted John Brady. "Don't let the whelp get away with it!"

By this time Bud had his gun out. He weaved slowly, back and forth, as he heeled through the batwings of the saloon. As he crossed to the hitch rack, he picked up his pinto and cracked two shots into the plank walk right under the saloon door. Those two shots held back any rush until he was thundering out of town with all the fast pinto could give.

"Accusin' me o' being a holdup killin' thief," he muttered. His blood was boiling. "An' I can't tell about this money without breakin' my word to Tod Burnham. So I'll have to stay on the dodge until I see Sarah. That's it! That's the last place they would come lookin' for me. Nobody hereabouts would ever think of my hidin' out at the Potter Ranch."

HE THOUGHT of his reason for not answering the double-barreled question of that dumb marshal. "There'll sure be hell poppin' if it was found out that Sarah Potter and me has been makin' up to each oher. I got to git to her before she hears the news and talks. If she does, it'll start a shoot-out between two old men who can't even remember what they've been feudin' about."

Bud's pinto was fast. He figured his time. He had to change horses. The black-and-white pony could be spotted for miles. Once in the home horse corral he cut out a long distance dun that would be difficult to pick out against any landscape.

His father and sisters were abed. He put in five minutes getting extra blankets from his room. Then he realized that something was wrong. Some of his trail duds were missing.

"Ain't no time to check now," he muttered. "Marshal Rudd'll have a posse riding hell-for-leather from Red Gulch. If I want to prove my way out of this, I'll have to be a'mighty scarce when the law gits here."

He had just mounted when three riders swung down the lane, the only trail crossing the creek bridge. Bud saw that Rudd was one of the riders. He fingered his six-gun, but dropped it back into leather.

"Dang my cats! I gotta have suthin' more than mistooken identity when I shoot a man!"

Bud pulled the next best trick. Rudd and the others hadn't seen him near the corral fence.

When the law was but fifty yards away, Bud fed steel to the dun and the big beast shot forward like an arrow.

Bud kept low in the saddle, driving directly at Rudd's horse in the middle of the trio. Bud yelled and the roaring surprise with the speed of his horse separated the other riders. Before Rudd or the other hombres could go for their irons, Bud had the charging dun upon them.

He collided with Rudd's beast, upsetting the marshal from his hull. Rudd's yelled command to, "Get the son!" couldn't pull down the spooked horses of the other men fast enough.

Before the first shot cracked out, Bud was pounding over the creek bridge into the gratifying darkness of the tall cottonwoods. He deliberately swerved from the trail here, cutting into the trees and rocks over a dangerous route that he knew would put him on Potter's Circle-C.

"Then all I hafta do is shut Sarah's mouth an' git Tod Burnham to tell them hotheads about the money I was showin'," reasoned Bud.

"Still and all, it's danged queer Ike Miller should have give my description as the gazink that slugged him. Thinkin' it over," he mused, "it mightn't be so queer at that. Once a black sheep, allus a black sheep."

He lost all pursuit as the sky was grayed with dirty daylight. Bud holed up in the rough rocks of a hogback high on the Circle-C. From here he could watch three trails leading to Red Gulch. They were empty of riders as the sun came up.

Bud rolled into his blankets after hobbling the horse on a grazing patch, well concealed. He slept and grinned in his sleep as his mind remained upon the one sure witness about that money.

SARAH POTTER'S dark eyes were questing and eager. She had coppery red hair coiled on a well-poised head. Her olive skin had taken on the coloring of all outdoors. Trim, long legs reached her saddle stirrups.

She knew trail sign. The day was drawing toward a purple evening. Perhaps the girl's heart beat stronger and with more happy rhythm as she thought of the nights she had ridden with Bud Brady.

Like Bud, Sarah had never been able to discover what had started the feud between the stubborn old men.

"We'll just end it by walkin' out on 'em an' raisin' some non-feudin' brats of our own," was Sarah's way of putting it.

With which practical sentiment Bud Brady was in complete agreement.

But this evening Sarah's searching eyes were deeply troubled. Tom Potter had been down to Red Gulch. Sarah had to dig out what was troubling him when he returned home. She hadn't liked what she had learned. Part of it she knew could not be true. But there was a second part that seemed to have Bud Brady roped and hogtied.

Now Sarah was close to some jumbled rocks.

" 'Lo, honey!" greeted Bud cheerfully. "Reckon I turned day to night an' slept right through."

"You've been sleepin' there all day, Bud?" demanded Sarah.

"Yup, an' I'm hongry as six orphaned wolf pups," said Bud. "Yuh wouldn't have a biscuit in yore saddlebags, maybe?"

"No!" snapped the red-headed girl. "But I'll bring you some food. Looks as if you'll have to spend the night up here. An' without a fire. Rudd's burnin' up, an' your saintly brother John is helpin' stir up the gulchers. Bud, what about that money you had?"

Bud grinned at her. He hadn't mentioned about the Tod Burnham pay. When he promised to keep a secret he kept it. Bud knew he was regarded as the black sheep of the Bradys.

He *did* hell around. He gambled. Apparently he tossed away his entire pay for every market drive. It rubbed his

Bud sent two shots at the saloon door to hold back the rush.

sanctified brother John raw, and Bud had a lot of fun over that.

Bud looked up at Sarah Potter. There wasn't a sweeter fashioned gal critter in Arizona and several other states. Bud's grin gave him the appearance of a kid with one hand in the jam jar.

"I asked you about the money you had, Bud." Sarah had heard too much of the danger hovering over Bud to be sweet-tempered. She had heard even more than Bud knew.

"Money?" said Bud blankly. "Sure I've got money. Enough to buy up an' stock a small spread for you an' me, an' then yore dad an' mine kin go after each other with shotguns."

"Stop the foolishness!" said Sarah sharply. "Everybody knows you're a sucker what loses all of his drive pay as soon as you can hit a gambling table."

Bud's face grew long and mournful. The truth was he had about nine thousand in folding money flattened in a belt

next to his hide. What others didn't know was that Bud Brady never gambled more than half of any drive pay. The rest he had been keeping for that day when he could feel he had enough to ask Sarah Potter to ride away with him.

Then he could tell her. But not until then.

"That money I flashed at the saloon last night was paid onto a secret drive, Sarah," he said seriously. "I ain't gonna even try to account for the time Ike Miller was robbed. I was up here with you, an' yore dad was raisin' hell about it. But you're keepin' out'n it, Sarah. Yuh gotta swear to that, no matter what happens."

"I'll think about that," said Sarah more gently. "Bud, honey! You still ain't explained about havin' that money last night."

"I'm keepin' a secret, Sarah," grinned Bud. "An' I ain't a blabbin' woman critter. Soon as I git to Tod Burnham, he'll put 'em straight about the dinero—"

"Tod Burnham?" The red-headed girl gasped the words. "He'll not put anybody straight on anything, Bud. Tod Burnham was dry-gulched after he rode out of Red Gulch last night. He was shot in the back an' robbed of cattle pay the express agent says was about nine or ten thousand dollars.

"Bud, Ike Miller's alive. But you're bein' charged with dry-gulching an' robbin' Tod Burnham, an' that cold-blooded murder."

"Tod Burnham gulched—robbed—Tod Burnham—dead—"

Bud Brady's senses were suddenly all fogged up. His tongue was thick. His brain was on fire. Tod Burnham had been the one witness he had depended upon. And this other?

Burnham had been robbed of around nine thousand dollars.

That was just about the amount belted to Bud Brady's waist. And who would know now of the hundred dollars a drive he had been collecting from Tod Burnham—secret drives, because Burnham had figured he could get better prices for his beef if he didn't pool them with other cattlemen.

SUDDENLY Bud Brady knew what he had to do. All his hopes and dreams of a surprise for Sarah were ended. Instead, a hang-rope dangled before his eyes. He would see himself dragged to Marshal Rudd's jail, being searched, being questioned, and Tod Burnham had been robbed of about nine thousand dollars.

"Yuh'll not be believin' this, Sarah," said Bud Brady, "but I ain't been tossin' away all o' my drive money on the games. I got us around nine thousand dollars saved, to buy up stock for a little spread. Tod Burnham lost nine thousand dollars and I've got nine thousand dollars, not his but my own, in a money belt right close to my hide."

He reached inside his wool shirt and unsnapped a buckle. He pulled out a flat belt. He gave it to Sarah.

"I was keepin' it a secret, Sarah, but now you're takin' it. All you've gotta do, is take one good look at the foldin' money inside that belt to know that some of it's been there five years or more. But Marshal Rudd wouldn't be takin' that into account."

Sarah stared at him. It did seem impossible to believe that the black sheep of the Brady family who, at the end of every cattle drive, was reputed to have thrown away his total earnings at the saloon, could have got together nine thousand dollars in a space of five or six years. But there it was.

Sarah said softly, "Yuh know, Bud, I think you've just explained something to me I've never been able to answer to myself, why I found myself lovin' you. It didn't make sense, darling, but somehow there was something underneath, something you would not quite tell, that pulled me like a magnet. I know now what it is."

Bud Brady laughed shortly. He said, "Anyway, fate runs funny rannies on a galoot. First off, I'm tellin' yuh that even if yuh think yuh oughtta, if I'm caught,

it'll do you no good to come into court and say I was with you at the time Ike Miller was slugged and robbed. Don't yuh see, honey? There's some'll know I picked yuh out for my girl, and whether it was true or a lie, what else would yuh be expected to say. It would do both of us more harm than good."

Sarah nodded her coppery head unhappily. "I can see that, Bud, but what are we going to do? You can't take it on the run and be on the dodge the rest of your life, seein' as how they now have the dry-gulchin' and robbin' of Tod Burnham tied in with the other robbery, and they think that you were in a position to've pulled off both chores?"

"I know that," said Bud. "If the way is clear, Sarah, jest fetch me some grub for the night. I'm thinkin' it over. I've jest one thing and it's not too positive. Jest one little thing that may upset all of the circumstances against me."

It was all dark now as Sarah rode the two miles back to the Circle-C to bring chuck for Bud Brady. He was to spend the longest night of his life, pacing among the rocks, thinking what he had best do.

"I can't fight 'em," he muttered. "I'd be outnumbered anyway and I can't shoot honest men for carrying out what they think is their duty."

ED PERKINS, the agent at the express office, had just watched the nine o'clock stage pull out for Cedar City. He glared at the two boxes the driver had put down. They were consigned to the P & H Cattle Co. He knew the two boxes contained payroll money to cover a period of three months. His check list showed more than forty thousand dollars in the two boxes.

Even the slugging and robbing of Ike Miller had not served to alarm other citizens of Red Gulch, including Ed Perkins. Anyway Marshal Rudd had the robbery of Miller and the dry-gulching of Tod Burnham pretty well pinned upon Bud Brady, the black sheep of the Brady family.

"There ain't a chance that Bud Brady would stick his nose into Red Gulch right now," said Ed Perkins grimly. "Like as not he never will again. He'll be left swingin' from the limb of some cottonwood tree. I only wish't I wasn't tied up here so's I could be out with the rest of the fellers huntin' down the skunk."

He turned back into the office. A chill ran through him. He was looking down the muzzle of a .45. The holdup man stood braced, his feet wide apart in worn riding boots. His levis were torn and ragged. He was wearing a blue wool shirt. He had a heavy black mask over his face, under a Stetson.

"You get back o' the counter, Perkins!" ordered a hoarse voice, "and lay down. One yip outta you and they will carry you out feet first."

Whatever else Ed Perkins was, maybe a little on the dumb side, he didn't scare easily. Instead of obeying, he dived from his toes, his head lowered and aimed at the stomach of the holdup man.

The holdup man was smart enough not to risk a crashing shot that would sound an alarm, although two-thirds of the male citizens were in the hills hunting Bud Brady. It was Ed Perkin's flashing thought, as he dived, that Bud Brady had known of this payroll shipment and had doubled back on all the posse to pick up the boxes as soon as they were taken from the stage.

Having greeted the stage, when it came without passengers, the few citizens left in town had retreated to the Fairplay Saloon. The street was deserted. There was no one to see the brutal downward chop of the gun barrel that hit the base of Ed Perkins' brain at the spine, breaking his neck and killing him instantly. In fact, the body of Ed Perkins was not found until nearly three hours later, when the lateness of a light in the express office aroused the interest of a few curious citizens.

The two boxes of P & H payroll money had vanished. A lone rider had come into town. That same lone rider had these boxes when he rode out. Curiously enough

it might have been noted that the holdup man did not ride more than a mile outside the city limits before he circled back.

SARAH POTTER appeared, with hot biscuits wrapped in a towel, before the sun was up. She found Bud Brady saddled and ready to light out.

"Makin' a run for it, darling?" Sarah's tone disapproved.

"Yeah, honey. I'm makin' a run for it. I'm headin' for the Marshal Rudd jail, only hopin' I make it 'fore somebody gets hurt."

"Bud?" The girl's voice was serious to the point of pain. "You didn't leave this place at any time during the night?"

Already the fence post phone line had been buzzing with the word of Ed Perkins' murder and the express office robbery.

Bud Brady shook his head sadly.

"Spill it, Sarah. What've I gone an' done now? Don't tell me I've put another notch in my black sheep record without gittin' outta the hills."

"Bud, the express office was robbed of the P & H payroll an' Ed Perkins was killed," said Sarah. "Two or three loafers around the Fairplay tell of seeing the holdup man—wearin' levis, old boots, and a blue wool shirt. He had a black mask. They say he rode hell-bent outta town, but they didn't find Perkins for three hours after that."

Bud swallowed hard. A terrific conviction was growing upon him.

"Darling, I'm riding off the Potter range come daylight," he said. "I'm ridin' up to the first posse with my hands in the air. There ain't ary call for shootin'. Marshal Rudd is only doing his duty as he sees it."

"But what can we do then?" cried the girl.

"I'll tell yuh how yuh kin help," said Bud suddenly. "Yore old man swings a lot o' weight with Marshal Rudd. Yore dad will balk, maybe, but maybe he won't. Judge Stacy allus pulls a quick hearin' to keep down hang-rope talk. He had a lynchin' once."

"But what will we do with Marshal Rudd?" demanded Sarah, her clear face drawn and white.

But Brady talked fast. Sarah was looking at him as if she believed him loco when he finished. But her love for Bud was the outstanding motive for her life today.

"I think you're a little touched, darling, but I'll make Dad play it that way."

Bud Brady kissed her. She was a smart ranch girl. She rubbed a firm hand over the roan.

"One thing is true," she said. "This hoss ain't been pushed to Red Gulch and back during the night."

Bud grinned and kissed her. He swung aboard and headed out of the hills and off the Circle-C. He was over on the home ranch when a small posse started to circle him warily, like hounds closing in on a savage wolf.

Bud Brady sat there with his empty hands lifted over his head. This was the capture of Bud Brady, even if some of the posse didn't tell it quite that way.

JUDGE STACY called the hearing for the schoolhouse. The judge was one man west of the Pecos who wore gray sideburns and looked like some English author.

The room was jammed. Bud Brady stood up, on order. Judge Stacy himself recited the charges. He was a justice who believed in combining everything in evidence against a defendant.

"If some slippery cuss gits outta one crime, maybe he'll be tangled up in another one," Judge Stacy always explained.

Judge Stacy's voice took on its courtroom rumble.

"Bud Brady! You are charged with assault upon Ike Miller, and the robbery of his store. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," said Bud quietly.

"I expected you'd say that," sighed the judge. "You also stand charged with the back-shootin' murder of Tod Burnham and the robbing of his body of a large sum of money. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty!" snapped Bud. "And yuh don't hafta ask about Ed Perkins an' the express office. I ain't guilty o' that neither!"

The judge shook his head. "Before I impanel a jury, young man, maybe you can account for yore whereabouts when these crimes against the commonwealth were committed?"

"I can't do that either," said Bud, shaking his head.

He could hear a mad mutter ripple through the crowd. He saw his saintly brother John right up in the front row. From the wolfish smile on his face, Deacon John was well satisfied to see the family black sheep hanged or even spitted over a pit of coals and barbecued.

Bud saw his two older sisters, both crying into their handkerchiefs. Andrew Brady, his father, sat there with his rugged face as unmoved as a piece of granite. Among all of the townsmen there was not one friendly face.

"Damme! I say use the rope an' save all this botheration!" shouted a voice at the back of the room.

"Yeah! Yeah! That's the ticket! All this palaverin' ain't gittin' nowhere!"

Judge Stacy hammered with his gavel.

"Where's Marshal Rudd?" he demanded. "He oughtta be here to keep order!"

"Reckon he ain't wantin' order kept!" guffawed a drunken citizen.

"So you can't say where you was when any o' these crimes were committed?" demanded Judge Stacy.

"If he can't, well, I kin!" rasped the voice of a tall, bony man pushing his way down the aisle. "I know where he was when Ike Miller was robbed!"

Bud Brady saw his father's face go stone white. The newcomer was none other than old Tom Potter, his lifetime enemy.

"Well, Mr. Potter," said Judge Stacy with respect for the big rancher. "Where was Bud Brady at that time?"

"He was on my upper range, sparkin' my gal, an' I was raisin' blue hell with both of 'em!" roared Tom Potter. "The young no-good heller jest laughed at me. Had the crust to tell me that his old man an' me oughtta have better sense than to go around hating each other. And then —by hocky! He kisses my gal right afore my eyes 'fore he rides off."

"An' what time would you make that, Mr. Potter?"

"Right smack midnight by my silver watch, an' she ain't been a minute off in fifty years," boasted Tom Potter. "I took command then, like a father should, an' I told my gal she wasn't to ever see that Brady black sheep again. She sassed back, an' said she'd been riding with Bud Brady for five hours, an' next Sat'day she'd invited him to the house for supper."

KNOWING old Tom Potter's hatred for the whole Brady tribe, his first alibi could not have come from a better source. It was a surprise to Bud Brady.

He could see his father's face. Andrew Brady looked as if he was trying to decide whether to shoot Tom Potter now or wait until court was over.

Sarah Potter still had not appeared. Neither had Marshal Rudd.

Judge Stacy said, "So much is in your favor, young man. But these two murders stand against you. You're still wearing the old duds that have been described by Ike Miller, and by others who saw the holdup ride away from the express office."

"And who knows, but that he was wearing them when he robbed Miller," spoke the solemn voice of John Brady, who was sitting serenely in his black store clothes and his white-collared shirt. "Old man Potter ain't knowing about whether Bud and that gal of his was ridin' at the time of the store holdup. A gal who would go out with my hellin' brother—" That was as far as John Brady got.

"Why you long-faced worm on two feet!" yelled Tom Potter and launched himself upon John Brady. He had cracked him squarely on the nose and knocked

(*Continued on page* 111)

BAD BLOOD

NOT OFTEN I get this mellow, but reckon I just feel like doing a little talking Yeah, it's sort of an unusual name for a joint, just plain Doll's but that's the way she named it when she hit this town and that's the way it's always been. Sure, that's her picture right there over the bar. *Heh!* She was pretty when she posed for that. That's her,—Doll Dorais, sort of creamy color all over except for the red slash of her mouth and the red in her cheeks. No, sir, she never was nothing but a woman from the Klondike that didn't know nothing but joints like this —but all I can say is she was a better woman than any man was *man* that ever walked in here! And that covers a lot of territory!

Pretty eyes, hasn't she? But I can see you haven't even got around to look at her eyes! *Heh!*

What's that, bad men? Listen, little fellow, this joint, Doll's, has seen them

By
JOHN McCUNE

Marie picked up every bottle she could lay her hands on, and did five hundred dollars' worth of damage in thirty cents' worth of time.

Illustrated by Kingsland Ward

all. Wyatt Earp used to sit in that chair right over there, and Bat Masterson has hoisted drinks right where you're standing, and John Ringo, and Hoppy Mangrum. Bad men ain't nothing. Trouble with a bad man is the *really* bad ones never tangle with the advertised bad ones, if you see what I mean. The really bad ones are the quiet, happy-go-lucky cowboys that go along their calm and peaceful way until something really hits them and upsets 'em inside. Then *what!* Walk wide and careful of them guys—they're dynamite! Take Hoppy Mangrum for example.

There was a cowman, a real cowman. I ain't saying he never tossed a wide loop or never made a practice of branding mavericks. All the old-timers did. But Hoppy came in here from nobody knows where and, starting from scratch, in just a few years' time had the next-best spread in three states. Fact is, he was pushing the Pikes. You know, the Black Pikes, Joey and Johnny and Dusty. He used to come in here on payday nights with his boys and he'd whoop and holler at the door, and for the next half hour nobody could pay for a drink but Hoppy Mangrum.

That galoot, Hoppy Mangrum, was a plumb peculiar gent. And that lady named Doll!—there was a woman men never could forget. Those two made the rangeland sizzle when they tangled with the clan known as the Black Pikes.

AND Hoppy never had an eye for anyone else but Doll herself—that is, among the girls. She'd hear him whooping and she'd come out and stand right there at the head of them steps, those pretty eyes flashing, and Hoppy would run to the foot of the steps, and she'd call, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefor art thou, Romeo?"

And Hoppy, laughing to beat hell, would answer, "Never mind Romeo, Doll, here's Hoppy!"

She'd come five or six steps down the stairs toward his outstretched arms, and then she'd shriek, prettylike, and jump. Every ranny in the room would cheer—except maybe Carp Earnshaw—while Hoppy caught her, kissed the heck out of her, and walked to the bar toting her in his arms.

Later on Hoppy would be sitting in the poker game, with Doll right behind him to bring him luck.

I said everyone enjoyed it but Carp Earnshaw. Carp came by his name honest—he looked like a carp! Carp was a killer—there was no doubt about that. He was on the Pikes' payroll, but nobody ever heard of him doing any work. He was a handy man to have around in case a squatter decided to settle on the Pike range, or in case one of the Pikes had an argument with somebody or other. Nearly all the old-time spreads had a gunman on the payroll. But Hoppy Mangrum didn't. Guess he figured he could take care of his own trouble.

Now mind you, Doll never gave Carp no encouragement. It was just that she was the kind of woman who looks attractive to every man, and Carp, being the sort of guy he was, hated Hoppy. When Hoppy would swirl her up on the bar, maybe she wasn't as careful as she should have been, and me, from this side of the bar, I could watch Carp's face. He'd eye her fine features and his face would go taut and his tongue flick out at his lips and he'd throw down whiskey like water.

Might have been him and Hoppy would have finally showed down about Doll—except it came up first about a name Carp called Hoppy one night when Carp was drunk, mean drunk

Hoppy was brown as a saddle from range riding, but I'll never forget his jaw muscles—white and as big as walnuts—and his eyes! Don't listen to the stories about a killer's eyes being slits! No, sir! Hoppy Mangrum was a killer right at the moment,and his eyes was wider than any human eyes I ever saw, and there was fire flashing out of them. And his mouth—well, it was twisted in a grin, thin and *purplish*, so help me!

He said, soft and low, "Come closer, Carp, so you can aim straight. And when you get ready, *reach!*"

There was death walking on cat feet, I tell you, when Carp came forward. One step, two steps—three—four—five! Not a sound in the joint—even the Doll had froze and shut up. There was Hoppy, his thumbs in his belt and there came Carp toward him, one hand hovering over the Colt at his right hip.

Three steps away from Hoppy, he stopped. His cold blue eyes stared at Hoppy like a caught fish. You could have counted ten while he stood there staring—and then he began to go slack. Yep, Carp sort of sagged, drooped in the middle. It was Hoppy that took the two or three steps. A look of contempt came over Hoppy's face as Carp's eyes shifted. He drew back his fist and crashed it against Carp's chin. He picked him up and hit him again in the same spot with the same hand!

YEP, that was that. Except a week later Carp went to Hoppy and told him thanks: Carp said he really had had it coming and realized it—which same, you might say, is what you might call an anticlimax!

I never mentioned Hoppy's kid, did I? I'm sure getting old. Fact is, we all knew he had a kid about twelve years old going to one of them there military schools back East in Nebrasky learning to be a sol-

dier. I got to tell you about Bubba Mangrum on account of *he* is the badman I been holding in mind, the bad man I'm going to talk to you about a little later on. Reckon I failed to mention him on account of up to the time I've got to in my story none of us had ever seen him.

Then Marie Pike came home from a year or so she'd spent back East farther than Nebrasky. The Pike boys was all dark people, which is how they got their name, the Black Pikes, and when Marie went away from here her hair was black as the underside of a crow's wing, to sort of match her eyes. But when the stage pulled up before Durham's store and she got out, wearing one of them dinky little hats, I reckon every ranny in seeing distance gulped and stared and shook his head in disbelief. She had the first head of platinum hair ever to hit Cochise County.

Hoppy Mangrum was there. I mean at Durham's store. And he gulped just as hard and stared just as hard as the rest of us. That was payday night, too, and for once he didn't come into Doll's saloon ripping and roaring. He just eased in gentle-like and sat down at a table. After awhile Doll came downstairs with a troubled look on her face and went over to him. I took them a bottle of Old Overholt and a pair of drinking glasses, and she had her arm around his shoulders and was saying, "You fool! You poor cow-critter fool! Damn you, haven't I *always* told you you never owed me a dime or a thought? Hasn't it always been that way, Hoppy?"

I got away from there, thinking just one thing—that "always" is a long long time.

So I guess he figured she was right—that he didn't owe her anything. For in three month's time he married Marie Pike.

IN SOME ways, Doll Dorais was like a man. Don't you get the wrong idea, mister, just take a look at that there picture over the bar. Like the drummer said a few days ago, "Ain't that the most luscious bit of femininity a man ever feasted his eyes on!" What I mean is she'd knocked around so long in this here business that she thought and felt and sometimes acted like an *hombre* instead of a *mujer*. She stayed upstairs exactly ten days in her room seeing no one but me, old Lockjaw Simmons, and consuming more liquor than most men could jump around in twenty days.

Funny part is, she never cried once. But the way she used to talk! Me, I'd been around her so long I reckon she looked on me as sort of neuter gender. I'd go in with a fresh bottle and there she'd be, walking the floor, with that pretty little red-silk kimono she always wore hanging negligent-like around her shoulders. Back and forth she'd go, from window to door, from door to window, cigarette smoke hanging around her pretty head, talking a mile a minute. She was hanging on by sheer will.

"I'll live. I'll live," she'd grate. "Women like me live forever. She's the girl he wanted and that's where I sent him. It won't work for them; of course it won't work—but what could I do, Lockjaw?"

Me, I said nothing. I just went *tch-tch* and shut up.

"That witch!" she'd scream, and whang the table with her fist, her rings sparkling. "A Black Pike, and he goes for her! There's something dirty and worm-eaten in the whole Pike family, I tell you; but if I'd have tried to stop him, he'd have hated me, Lockjaw! For fifteen years I've known him, do you hear? I could have married him!" *Wham*, went the fist. "I've seen him and heard him begging me to marry him! And I refused, because I know what I am and what I'll always be—a lady saloonkeeper. We've been everything and all things to each other, Hoppy Mangrum and I. And now *she's* got him!"

I'd gulp, and I'd say, "Aw, Doll, he'll still come in on payday, just like always. You'll hear him yelling whoopee and he'll

wait at the foot of the stairs for you just like always."

And all the time I'd know it was a damned lie. No Pike ever let loose of what they once got their hands on, and Marie might have platinum hair, brand-new platinum hair, but she was a Pike.

To be downright truthful, it wasn't altogether a lie. Hoppy did come in on payday nights—just like he used to do. And he'd sit down calm and peaceful-like at a table and Doll would sit down with him and they'd talk maybe an hour, or maybe a little more or a little less. A bunch of wrinkles was coming between his eyes and his forehead was sort of corrugated, like, and it seemed he was grimmer than he used to be. I said they'd talk, but I take that back; for mostly they just sat—not even drinking much, just sort of staring unseeingly at the dancers and the gamblers and the drinkers and the dancehall gals raising payday hell.

I REMEMBER the night he brought Bubba in. Bubba was fourteen then and tall for his age, looking swell in his soldier suit with one of those shiny-brimmed caps and an over-the-shoulder belt. He was the spitting image of his paw, sort of a miniature Hoppy Mangrum. So the *three* of them sat there at that table, the kid drinking sody, and it was a toss-up which one of them looked the proudest, Doll or Hoppy or the kid! Proudest and happiest.

The swinging door pushed wide and little by little the noise died down, tapered off. Marie Mangrum, formerly Marie Pike, stood there, arms akimbo, glaring at the table where the three of them sat. Her face was dead-white and her mouth was wide open—like she was about to scream.

Somehow or other she got control of herself, but seeing her all hopped up I couldn't help but remember what Doll had said about there being something rotten and worm-eaten in all the Pikes. Her lips clamped shut, she took two or three deep breaths. Hoppy didn't move, the kid was open-mouthed, Doll was as white as Marie.

"Damn you," said Marie and her voice was like a file on steel, "I told you about this! I told you to stay away from this—Well, let it drop, mister, I quit using bad language."

Hoppy said, when he could get in a word, "Go home, Marie. I'll be home by midnight."

Then she screamed. And that noise ran up and down my spine like the cold fingers of fate. She rushed at that table, and I believe she would have clawed Doll's eyes out of her face, but Hoppy just stood up and blocked her off. Once, twice, three times her curved fingers tore at his face, and each time they brought blood. She drew back then and quit screaming. But it got worse—she threw back her head and started laughing. She snatched the bottle off the table, she turned and heaved it. Right through the mirror! She ran for the bar—believe me they wasn't a man in her way by then! —and she picked up every bottle she could lay her hands on. It took her thirty cents' worth of time to do five hundred dollars' worth of damage. Then she ran out the front door.

"Lockjaw," said Hoppy, calmly, though he was bleeding to beat hell, "I was drinking Old Overholt." Somehow I found another bottle and started toward the table. To Doll, Hoppy said, "Figure it up, Doll, and I'll pay you, cash on the barrelhead."

Believe it or not, that was that. He never mentioned it again, and no man in Cochise County ever had guts enough to bring it up. There was talk of course, about the Pike temper—old man Pike and one of his brothers died in the crazy house—but that talk was behind Hoppy Mangrum's back.

I often wondered if he went home that night and had it out with Marie. All he'd have to do was to tell her Doll was just a friend, that never since he'd said "I do" to the preacher had he so much

as put a hand on anyone else. I reckon he didn't tell Marie that. Pikes are funny people; they'd always believe the worst anyway.

BUT Hoppy didn't quit coming in on payday night. The kid went on back to school, and Hoppy got more wrinkled and a little bit gray at the temples as time rolled by. Doll never changed. She was one of them ageless women that would keep her face and her figure until they put her in her coffin. Hoppy kept picking up land here and there, smart deals all of them and none of them crooked, and buying cattle and raising horses until by golly he was as big a man as there was around these here parts. And *that* brought him up against the Pikes.

I guess there'll always be people in the world like the Black Pikes. All three of the boys was well over six feet tall and not a damned one of them weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds. They were all swarthy, with hooked noses and shifty eyes and a slot of a mouth. And they was all the kind of guys that would lay down their right eyes for twenty acres of grassland—providing it put them twenty acres ahead of their nearest competitor. What I'm trying to point out is that money didn't mean a thing to the Pikes—but power did, and the feeling when they walked down the street that people were pointing them out saying, "There goes one of *the* Pikes!" They was in politics of course—people like them always are. They owned near't the whole political setup in our part of the state.

I haven't mentioned them so far on account of they hadn't really played no part in my story, not to speak of. At one time or other, Joey, Johnny, and Dusty had hung around Doll—but not for long. She didn't fool with their kind. Dusty was the most interested in her of the three, I reckon. She told me once she could have had three thousand acres of black land and a heavy number of blaze-faced cows—but she passed it by. I also heard—a bartender hears a lot—that it was Dusty tried to make legal trouble for her. But not even a Pike could close up a square-shooter like Doll Dorais.

What I'm trying to point out is that in spite of the fact that Hoppy was their brother-in-law, when he got big there just wasn't room enough in our part of the state for both outfits. Why, I could tell you a dozen dirty little deals the Pikes put on Hoppy Mangrum's back—and he took them all without squawking.

One night Doll told him, right out. She said, and I heard her say it: "Hoppy, you're riding for trouble. The Pikes are going to get you sure as God made little green apples! You're getting too big and they can't stand it!"

Know what? He just grinned and patted her knee sort of absentminded, then changed the subject.

He said, offhand, "I hear you been having a little trouble with Carp Earnshaw, Doll."

She flared. "Trouble? With that tinhorn gunman? Don't go sticking your nose in Doll's affairs, Hoppy. I handled Carp, and I can keep on handling him!"

Doll had indeed taken care of Carp just a couple of nights previous. Carp had got fresh with her and she'd turned on him, kinda roughlike. Then he'd turned roughlike himself, being half drunk, and had threatened to bust up the place. In addition to which he'd stated his opinion that all human female critters was two degrees lower than hydrophoby skunks.

His sayin' a thing like that riled Doll considerable. She grabbed a bottle off the bar, cracked off the end of the bottle, jabbed the sharp edges against his kidneys to hold him steady while she got his gun.

Then Doll had yelled: "Send in Little Fawn, pronto!"

You saw Little Fawn? She was some younger in them days and maybe three pounds lighter—weighing around three hundred. So in came Little Fawn, stone-faced and greasy as ever, from the

kitchen. And Doll said, "Go on, damn you, Carp, go on! Get down on your knees and say it or I'll cut your guts out!"

Down went Carp on his knees, mumbling, but getting louder when Doll put the busted bottle against his throat. He said, "I am a dog, I am a dirty dog. I ain't fitten to kiss a decent woman's feet, but I am sorry, and on account of Little Fawn wearing moccasins I guess she won't catch nothing!"

He quit. Grimly Doll pushed on the bottle. A little red worm of blood went down his neck. She said, "Go on."

He did. He kissed the toes of Little Fawn's dirty, smelly moccasins—and Carp Earnshaw wasn't a bad man in our country any more!

WHEN Ferguson got ready to retire and go back East—Ferguson of the Flying F—he sure got Hoppy in trouble, although he no doubt figured he was doing him a favor. He sold out to Hoppy and the deed was recorded before the Pikes even knew the ranch was on the market. Now that sounds like a little thing, but when you figure that even the Flying F was around 10,000 acres, you see what I mean. As far as land went, it put Hoppy Mangrum right up on top, and no Black Pike was going to take that lying down. Black Pikes wasn't built that way.

Doll warned Hoppy. I warned Hoppy. Everybody told him to watch his step and he had one answer. He'd grin, tired-like, and say, "I'm married into the family." Just like that meant something!

Me, Lockjaw Osborne, I am one of the few people that ever knew exactly what happened. The story, as it got out, went like this: Hoppy rode into town about three months later just as I was locking up Doll's saloon. He looked like a ghost. He didn't look to right or left, he just *clump-clumped* in a staggering run right through the joint and on up the stairs, and Doll's door slammed behind him. She came out in a minute with haughty eyes, and moved into another room. For the next ten days he stayed right there in Doll's room alone, night and day. The Old Overholt I took up there would have floated a battleship! First Joey Pike came looking for him, and had to talk to Hoppy through the door.

"Okay," said Joey Pike, "she sent me, and I got to tell her something. What'll it be?"

Through the door came Hoppy's thick voice, "Tell Marie I said I was going to stay here, that I'm never coming home again."

Joey Pike said, "What about your spread, pardner? You can't run it from a saloon like this."

"To hell with the spread," was his answer. "If I see her again, I'll choke her. She can have the spread, damn her."

And when Joey Pike came down the stairs he was grinning like a skunk on a garbage pail!

That's the way the story was told, but me, I know what made him come a-running to Doll. Why? I ain't going to lie—I listened at the door. Remember, I said he went staggering up there, just like he was drunk? Well, sir, by the time I got my ear laid against the wood all I could hear was Hoppy Mangrum crying! There's something about a man crying that gets you. Naw, I don't mean a drunk, I mean a two-fisted he-man like Hoppy Mangrum!

Pretty soon I heard Doll saying, "There, there, there" just like you'd soothe a baby!

The sobs sort of quieted, and Hoppy said, "Damn her—if it had been anybody else but Carp Earnshaw—and right in my own house! Look, Doll, her in a chair and him beside her, his arms around her, kissing her! My wife!"

Outside the door I had thought, "Great Godfrey! He's killed Carp and his wife, too!"

"I started to kill him," went on Hoppy, "and instead I couldn't force a word out of my mouth! I . . . I . . . well, I'd idolized her, you know that. She was

. . . a . . . gentlewoman . . . and I figgered when Bubba finished up and come home— Me, I ain't nothing, you know what I've done—what I've been . . . I thought she could make it up to Bubba—but Carp Earnshaw—!" Then he started crying again.

Doll was crying too, and I happened to notice that tears were sort of trickling down *my* face! It even makes me feel badly now thinking about it, him looking forward to Bubba's future, and then finding out Marie had them feet of clay you hear about.

TO CUT it short, when he came down from the second floor after ten days, he'd lost twenty pounds and had the shakes. I mean he was in bad shape. The rest of it happened almost too fast to believe. Nemesis bobbed up in the shape of Dusty Pike. Dusty was the youngest of the three Black Pikes—and to my mind the most dangerous. He wasn't quite as shifty-eyed as Joey and Johnny, and his jaw was a little squarer. Not that it meant a lot.

He came into Doll's saloon and found Hoppy sitting by himself at the back table, right over there. Hoppy was drinking, and Hoppy was just a shadow of his old self. Dusty Pike didn't sit down. He stood there, with his hand on his gunbutt ready to go into action.

He said, "Mangrum, I've been hearing things, bad things, wicked things, that you've been saying about my sister. I want them stopped!"

Hoppy's hands was beneath the table. He didn't move.

"I'm going to give you a chance to stand up," said Dusty Pike, "and then I'm going to blow your belt buckle through your spine."

Hoppy had that vacuous, drunk man's grin—but from where I stood I could see his eyes. Not slitted, not narrowed. But wide-open and blazing like they was the night he buffaloed Carp Earnshaw.

He hiccoughed. And I couldn't catch what he said. Nobody ain't ever going to know what he said. For Dusty Pike cursed and drew and Hoppy shot him through the table top. As simple as that. Then Hoppy walked out the door and went over to the jailhouse and found Wheeler, our marshal, and gave himself up.

What followed is not very pretty. In a little matter of three weeks a Pike-bought judge gave Hoppy a life sentence at Huntsville, and I always figured he was damned lucky not to get the rope! He wouldn't say a word at his trial, just sat there stony-eyed and stony-jawed. Doll brought in an Eastern lawyer and he was good—but he had two strikes on him before he went to bat. Hoppy wouldn't say a word about Marie, about catching her kissing Carp Earnshaw, and he wouldn't let Doll talk. Marie was never called.

I'll be truthful: Bubba Mangrum didn't enter my head. I'd seen the kid only once, remember. Afterward, I found out that one of the Pikes wrote him a letter and told him his daddy was a killer. And it wasn't but three days after that that Doll got the letter from him saying he was leaving school.

DOLL tried to get a pardon for Hoppy. No luck. As Hoppy's wife, Marie now owned the whole Mangrum spread, because try as Doll might she could not find Bubba Mangrum. Even them Eastern detective fellows failed to trace him down, and nobody knows how much money she spent trying to locate him.

Hoppy lasted five years at Huntsville Prison before he died. You can't cage an eagle. And during those five years Marie Mangrum never once showed up in our town! The two Pikes, Joey and Johnny, when asked, simply said she was sick, and Doc Gallagher let it out that the old Pike ailment had caught up with her. In other words, he hinted she was crazy.

Doll Dorais is tough. Don't you ever forget it. She didn't blow up and go to hell, not Doll. She got outside more, she used to take Hoppy's black gelding and

ride for hours, and always alone. She went on with an even temper, operating the joint as always, and only once in all those years did she ever get really mad. And that was at me. She heard me remark that the button, Bubba, was a hell of a kid to jump up and disappear just because his pop killed a man. I went on to say any kid with spirit would have stuck by his father.

I won't tell you how mad she got—but I damned near lost my job! Even when Johnny Pike showed the note from Huntsville, right after Hoppy died, she didn't lose her temper that bad.

The note said—and it was addressed to Marie Mangrum:

Marie, my dear: I am sick and know I am about to die. Because Bubba has deserted me in my hour of need, he is no son of mine. The spread is all yours. Love, Hoppy.

Doll just looked at that note when Johnny Pike showed it to her, and shrugged her pretty shoulders. She said, "It's no skin off my elbow, Johnny Pike, why show it to me?"

Pike grinned his mean grin and walked off like a pleased cat.

IT WAS payday night when he walked in. He shouldered the swing doors aside and stood there grinning, his Stetson pushed back, his thumbs in his belt, sort of teetering on his heels. I grabbed the bottle and drank right out of the neck, and I wasn't the only ranny that thought he was seeing things. Then I took another look.

It was Hoppy Mangrum—but a Hoppy Mangrum about twenty-two years old! He swaggered up to the bar, and he said, "Old Overholt, Lockjaw."

I put it out. I said, mildly, "Bubba, you been gone a long time." Cause it *was* Bubba, it had to be! And just as I was getting ready to send someone for Doll, them doors swung again and in walked Carp Earnshaw. Right up to Bubba he made his way and slapped him on the back. Bubba grinned and asked for another glass for his *friend*. As the saying goes, that tore it.

Bubba said, "Yeah, I stayed away a long time. Carp, here, found me down Mexico way, and told me the score. Lockjaw, I want to see the woman who ruined my dad."

So I stood there turning it over in my mind, wondering how he expected to find Marie Mangrum in Doll's saloon.

"Tell her," went on Bubba, "that she might as well know I'm going to horsewhip her through the streets of this town, that I'm going to burn this joint. And all the law and order between here and the Pecos ain't going to stop me." And it was then I knew he was talking about Doll, and not Marie!

His eyes—those eyes! Just like his dad's, wide-open, all flashing pupil, and his mouth twisted in that same purple slit! That's what I mean when I talk about *really* bad men!

Somebody said, "Hello, Bubba." And Doll came down the steps. Like yesterday I remember it. She wasn't wearing her usual short dress. She was wearing something black and shimmering and gleaming that looked like it had been painted on her, from her curved throat clean down to her slender ankles. She came down the steps slow, slow, one hand behind her back, and the boys made a path for her. Bubba Mangrum stepped away from the bar and waited. Bubba wasn't a Mangrum any more. He was Old Man Death, waiting there to reach out and tap her on the shoulder with his bony fingers and say, "I want *you*, Doll Dorais."

She stopped just at arm's length. She smiled, and I'll swear she looked like that picture the Eyetalian feller painted once. She said, "I heard you, Bubba. You don't really mean what you said. Somebody—probably this Carp Earnshaw thing—has been filling you full of lies. You don't really believe them—you wouldn't be Hoppy's son if you did. But if you want it this way—here!"

Her hand came from behind her back. She thrust a heavy quirt at

him. He took it. He took a step backward and he raised the quirt.

I pulled the sawed-off shotgun out from beneath the bar and I said, "No, Bubba. Just drop it right there on the floor."

He never even looked my way. He said, "Shoot and be damned. That's the way I'll end up anyway."

I said, "You, Carp, did you tell him *why* his daddy left Marie and gave away the spread?"

"He told me," grated Bubba. "He told me plenty—enough to ruin my life. There I am, peaceful at last, ready to marry the finest girl in the world and he comes along! He tells me how Doll connived with the Pikes, damn her. Oh, she could wrap dad around her finger—but I know her for what she is!" What Bubba said then was enough to burn the place down.

Doll went white. For the only time in all the years I've known her, she looked her age. Finally she said, "Go ahead, Bubba, if that's what you think."

And I said, "Move, Bubba, just move, that's all. You'll never touch her. Carp hates her because he couldn't marry her! That's the why of this!"

And he said, "Shoot, damn your dirty soul, shoot!"

I reckon we'd have been frozen like that yet if it hadn't been for the Professor, the poor drunken bum who banged the piano. He started playing, *There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight* and that busted it up.

Earnshaw said, "Let's let it be for the present, pal."

The quirt fell to the floor. Bubba turned around and went out the door. Doll went back upstairs. I put the sawed-off shotgun away and said, "The next round is on the house."

So about three I locked up and I went upstairs and I listened to Doll for about fifteen minutes. I remember saying, "It won't work, Doll. He's Hoppy all over again, Hoppy on the kill, and with Carp to egg him on all hell can't stop him."

"We'll try," was all she'd say. "Most of it depends on you, Lockjaw. If you ever loved me, do your best. It's my only chance."

I found him at the Lone Star Hotel. I threw down on him and I tossed old Hoppy's clothes on the bed, and told Bubba what we'd do. He knew something big was planned, otherwise a man in his mental shape wouldn't have been scared of an old fat guy like me with a gun! He put on Hoppy's clothes. We went down the backstairs, and he got on Hoppy's gelding—the black baby with the white face that Doll had saved all these years! Not that he said anything. Sometimes I think it was because I told him right out that he'd see Doll, but whatever it was, he went peaceful.

We made the Pike ranch about four in the morning, just at false dawn when the roosters was blatting their silly brains out. And just as we rode over the rim of rock on the north side of the house, the flames busted out the roof of the barn! It had been a dry season and that barn went up like tinder. I herded Bubba toward the front of the house, went right on up to the front door and walked him in.

Doll was waiting, her face strained and gray in the dawn. She pointed toward a door. She said, "Walk in there, Bubba." He hesitated a minute—and stalked through the door.

AN OLD, old voice quavered, "Hoppy! *Hoppy!* I knew you'd come! Ah, Hoppy, they've been so mean to me, so bad to poor Marie!"

She got up out of the tumbled bed and literally leaped at Bubba. What's that? I don't know if I can describe her. I stood there remembering how Marie looked with that head of platinum hair when she came back from the East, before poor Hoppy married her. And I saw that in six or seven years she'd become—well, just an old crone whose madness gleamed in her eyes. And yet I was sorry for her.

"There's something rotten and wormeaten about the Pike's."

(*Continued on page* 114)

Food For Six-Guns

"Every man," says Jubilee, "has a weakness somewhere. And that weakness will prove his undoin'." He was to find that in the case of Slow George Miller, the vulnerable element was—food!

DUST churned in yellow clouds above the big corral of the Two Chain Ranch and cowbirds swooped in excited echelons above the heaving backs of the cattle which two chanting punchers were hazing out through the ranch yard toward the outer gate.

Frank Twilight felt his nerves jerk with a current of pride. Two hundred and fifty prime cows; the foundation for the future herds of his Anvil spread far to the north in the Belle Fourche valley. Sturdy, fertile stock from the domain of honest Will Roman of Two Chain, whose name was a legend among Wyoming cattlemen.

Twilight and his tophand, salty Jubilee Myers, had bunked in Raven the night before, eaten breakfast, made the short ride to Two Chain and now were ready to head homeward, their deal completed. It had left Frank virtually empty of

Illustrated by Newt Alfred

Frank felt a cool hand on his brow and realized that it was not a dream.

By CLIVE CRISWELL

purse, but in his pocket was the bill of sale for his transaction with Roman.

The Two Chain ranny who had helped Jubilee start the herd down the trail was riding back now, disappearing beyond the corrals. Frank thrust out his hand to the cattleman, standing on the ranchhouse veranda.

He said, "So long, Mr. Roman, and thanks."

"Yours truly," the other answered in a dry, easy tone. "Follow the stage trail from Raven. It goes clear through Four Horse to Dillinger, most of the way along the banks of Lodgepole Creek."

The Two Chain man was heavy and square; he wore a cotton shirt unbuttoned at the collar and his neck muscles snapped hard and tight when he moved his head. He was big-chested, with a short, flat nose and heavy, loosely rolled lips.

Frank Twilight lifted his buckskin into a gallop as Jubilee up front guided the leaders toward the distant ribbon which was Lodgepole Creek. Twilight's Anvil puncher rode back alongside and the two wheeled their horses, putting a final look back toward Two Chain's ram-

bling ranchhouse, stables and gesticulating windmill.

"So that's the great Will Roman?" said tophand Jubilee's flat voice. "There's lejun in the man! There's thistles in this whole bed of feathers, if you ask me! A big spread like Two Chain. He never even ask us to rest our saddles and eat! And no one else around but that Roman and that brush-popper who helped me ride herd!"

Frank said, "He explained that. The rest of his outfit was branding spring weaners at his south line camp. Even his cook was up there."

Jubilee folded his calloused hands on his saddlehorn. He was a wiry, hard-bitten little man whose trail-wise, disbelieving eyes were deep set in a dried-apple face.

"Wha. about them steers, kid?" he demanded.

Frank let his tugging horse nose into the buffalo grass along the trail as he searched for an answer.

To a stranger this tall, lank rider in his sweat-stained Stetson, faded shirt, Levis and peewee boots might have been one of a hundred carefree rannihans found in this broad cattleland. His face was lightly freckled and therefore rebelliously fair in a sun-burned clime; his mouth was jovially wide over white teeth and his dark eyes flashed in sharp contrast to thick hair, which was the color of a new wicker basket.

BUT behind the affability in Twilight's expression lay an opportunist's acceptance of the world as he found it. A young-old wisdom was an undercurrent here, capable either of tolerance or of hot, flaring dissent.

He had arranged the cattle purchase from Two Chain by an exchange of letters with Roman. It was after he had paid for them and Roman had drawn up a bill of sale that the Two Chain boss had said:

"By the way, friend, when my boys made this gather they brought in thirty spooky steers we missed at roundup. They're ready for market with a little more grass but I don't wanta bother movin' 'em up with my main feeders. I'll sacrifice 'em to you. Let's see—well, to make you a good friend of Two Chain—say at twenty dollars a head."

Twilight knew his face revealed his amazement. The price was so ridiculously low that he had wondered if Will Roman had gone suddenly daft.

His decision was easy enough to make. The purchase of the cows had taken nearly all his ready cash. In addition, he wanted no more feeder stock. His refusal was shaped for utterance even before he heard Jubilee, standing nearby, whistling a familiar tune. It was a song which the shrewd little cowprod often whistled when he felt his young boss needed cautioning. It had a refrain which said:

"A forty-four barrel on a forty-five frame;
Oh, never bet aces on another man's game."

Roman had shrugged affably when Frank turned his offer down but the young Anvil owner fancied he saw a trace of irritation in the heavy man's eyes.

Jubilee was again boring in with his sharp question: "What about them steers?"

Frank slapped his bronc into a trot and grinned. "It was the Santy Claus in him. I affect folks that way. They want to help me along. You'll be like that when I can't meet the payroll this month."

Jubilee Myers snorted and muttered darkly as he swept away after two wandering cows mapping a course which would have taken them eventually to the Black Hills, across the South Dakota border.

Dusk came with its sullen, head-on rush and Frank picked a juniper-lined coulee as a natural night corral for the herd. In the bottom of the fissure he built a campfire of sage stems. Jubilee and his wise old buckskin flitted ghost-shaped through the mesquite and the rider's crooning to the weary cows floated

first from one direction and then another. Frank grinned contentedly. Jubilee sounded like an entire crew at roundup.

The two were cross-legged before their fire, drinking their coffee, when the night brought the sound of horsemen approaching, unhurried and careful as wise riders would come knowing that a herd slept here.

THERE were four or five and they shaped up now in the edge of the campfire's glow; and oddly enough Frank's eyes went directly to a small, erect man in the middle of the line.

He was kindly looking and neatly groomed and austere; and somehow, Frank knew that he was looking at the *real* Will Roman.

One of the horsemen, a man with a great beak of a nose and sweeping cavalry mustache, made a movement with his hand and his six-shooter covered Frank and Jubilee.

"Reach, gents," the big man said, and Frank saw the glitter of the metal badge on his vest. "It's Sheriff Jesse Humbert speakin'!"

The two Anvil men came slowly to their feet. Frank said, "Take it easy, friend."

Another rider, a small vague shape, spurred a dun mare up from the shadows. A touch of excited curiosity, like a soft breeze in the night, touched Twilight and cooled the heedless temper which gripped him. The rider was a girl.

A flat-crowned sombrero's chin thongs framed the oval of her face. Her thick curls were ink-black; her eyes were a startling blue.

"Dad! Jesse! Don't treat these men like rustlers!" she said half angrily.

The erect, dignified man beside the sheriff put out a placating hand, touching the girl gently.

"Sue is right, Jesse," he said. He looked down into Frank's face. "You're Twilight?" he asked.

"That would be so," the Anvil owner answered.

"I am Will Roman of Two Chain. I'm afraid, son, you've been put over a barrel." The Two Chain riders swung from their saddles, and Roman's introductions were quickly made. Besides Humbert there was Sam Lavender, a spare, warm-eyed rannihan; also Abe Foster, ramrod of Roman's Two Chain spread. Frank's hand tugged his hat from his head and Jubilee dourly followed suit as Roman said with simple pride, "And my daughter Sue."

The girl's grip was firm and warm in Twilight's hand. His inner response to the friendly sympathy in her eyes was an impact which did not escape her; the secret knowledge that this prairie night belonged somehow apart from other nights claimed them both.

Frank said slowly, "The big bully-puss at Two Chain somehow didn't fit the picture I've always had in my mind of Will Roman. When you rode up I knew I was right. I've been played for a sucker. But who was it who sold me that she-stock?"

Sheriff Humbert was the one who answered:

"From the description Will and Sue gave me, it was Jersey Shalott, boss gunnie for Adam Leak's gang of outlaws. You've mebbe heard of 'em, son? Leak's in jail in Broken Bit on a train-holdup and murder charge. They jumped Two Chain, hopin' Will would have some ready cash about."

"Let me tell it," Sue Roman interrupted. She put a gloved hand on Frank's arm in an unconscious gesture. "Shalott and three of his warriors rode in on us before breakfast. His story to you about the Two Chain crew being up at the line camp was true enough. Our old cook, Miguel, tried to escape and ride for help." Her voice trembled and broke. "Shalott shot him in cold blood!"

"In searching Dad they found your letter, saying you would be at Two Chain today with the money for the herd. Your cows were already in the corral. It was easy for Jersey to masquerade as Dad. Another of the gang—Slow George Miller, they called him—helped you with the herd. A third man, Bones Merlin, stood

guard over Dad and me in the root cellar near the house. We could hear every word you spoke to Jersey."

Frank heard Will Roman's bitter voice: "They mauled me around a little, hurting nothing but my pride. But they roughed Sue up too. For that I'll one day kill Jersey Shalott!"

"If we meet him first, Frank or me'll deprive you of the pleasure!" Jubilee broke his glowering silence to snarl. "But why all this peacepipe palaver? This trail herd belongs to our Anvil Ranch now. We got a bill of sale. It was your Two Chain who was cold-decked!"

"Why you whoppy-jawed rooster!" barked Abe Foster. He crouched meaningly and with Lavender backed toward the edge of the campfire's pool of light, his hand poised for a stab at his gun butt

Frank roared: "Take it easy, you cow-kicked jugheads! Jubilee! Keep your hand away from that smokepole. I paid my money to a hooter for another man's cattle. I'll take my medicine."

The three proddy rannies traded glares and subsided meekly.

WILL ROMAN spoke up. He was a simple man and warmly emotional, and he murmured almost bashfully, "I'll take your note for the cows, Twilight. And I'll send Sam and Abe along with you for the drive to the Anvil—just in case you meet Shalott's crowd again."

Twilight's voice was as soft as the rustle of leaves. "I aim to cut their trail and take Mister Shalott apart. And thanks for your offer. I'll meet the note, somehow."

Abe Foster and Lavender picketed their mustangs as Roman and Sue and the big sheriff rode away into the night. They spread their blankets near the fire with the still-smarting Jubilee; but the young Anvil boss, a gaunt limber shape in the gloom, sat watching the dying firelight. Jubilee put a withering look over him. The Anvil puncher knew Frank was not thinking of his loss, but of a smiling girl who had wheeled her horse at the top of the rise to wave farewell.

They were up before dawn, hazing the lazy cows on across the flatlands. The early sun glittered on the mica crystals in the desert soil, changing the color of the sage and the bunchgrass. The herd's moving banner of dust rolled toward the sky. Before sundown they'd be on Anvil grass.

Up ahead Frank heard the spicy banter being exchanged by Foster and Lavender.

"Listen at them two mossyhorns," grunted Jubilee. "Fancy-dancin' down the trail, hungry to see what's over the hill. But ain't we all? Lookin' for a man big enough to whip us or who's faster with his gun. Or a woman who can resist us. Or a bottle we can't drink dry."

Twilight grinned at this prairie philosopher. "What would a man be if he wasn't looking for something?"

Without replying to the question Jubilee went on: "Take that ornery owl-hootin' Slow George Miller back at the Two Chain. To him the other side of the hill means food. He got friendly-like and got to jawin' with me. He's a gore-may, says Slow George. Can spot the fine points on a bill o' fare like a herd boss spots a case of hookworm."

"A gourmet? A calling which has its points," agreed Frank, chuckling.

"Told me his favorite dish was Bavarian goulash," the Anvil waddy revealed in shocked tones. "A heathen dish if I ever heard o' one. Said there's only one cook this side the Mississippi who can make it and that in a couple of days he's going to sit down at her table and eat his fill."

As Frank Twilight shunted an adventurous old baldface back into the herd his mind suggested something vague and formless. He said, "Keep 'em moving," and whisked away, overtaking the swing riders ahead.

The Two Chain punchers listened intently as Frank repeated Jubilee's story and they reflectively scratched stubbly chins over Frank's question:

"Know any cook in these parts who makes off-trail grub? Like Bavarian goulash?"

It was Sam who answered. "Likely it'd be old Mama Jingo in Four Horse. An old gypsy woman. They say she can make a tasty stew out of an old boot, plenty of pepper and a hot fire."

Frank waved Jubilee in for a powwow and the three punchers looked at each other curiously as he said:

"I'm drawing to a straight, open in the middle. But it's the only trail sign I see which'll take us to Jersey Shalott. Jubilee, you and Sam push the cows on to Anvil. Abe and me are going to Four Horse."

"A hell of a howdydo!" screeched Jubilee. "Got somethin' up your sleeve and are dealin' Abe in! And me and Sam are left nursemaidin' a lazy cow herd! Wotta you goin' to Four Horse for?"

Frank shouted back over his shoulder as he swung his horse away, Abe close behind:

"To eat some Bavarian goulash!" And with a wave, he was off.

FRANK TWILIGHT sat in the dirty, unshaded shanty on the fringes of Four Horse, choking on a fiery mouthful of chopped meats, peppers, sour cheese and corn meal.

Mama Jingo, a beaming crone with two teeth, hummed as she dished up another bowl of Bavarian goulash.

Frank's question fished in the water of her cook's deep pride. "I have a friend, Slow George Miller, who says none but you know how to make this goulash."

Mama's two teeth flashed an artist's thanks. "That George," she simpered. "Last night he came and ate until he slept. He comes again tonight. That kettle is for George alone." She nodded toward a great pot bubbling on the iron stove.

Frank's grin was an invitation to rare conspiracy. "The old wolf! Our trails haven't crossed in a year. Maybe I ought to surprise him—"

"Hide in the shed room, son. He'll laugh to kill at our plot. Within the hour George will come."

It was much less than that. Frank had scarcely retreated to the dark shed, searching feverishly for tobacco and papers to smother the fire of the goulash, when a heavy fist rapped at the shack's door and a deep voice shook the flimsy kitchen with its heartiness. "Hand me a dipper of water and yon kettle, mama, and give my elbows room!"

Mama's cackle flared to a shriek as Twilight pushed open the shed door. Slow George nearly upset the table coming to his feet in a spasm of fear as he saw and recognized the Anvil boss.

"Your belly put a rope around your neck, friend," Frank said. "And there's only me who can cut it loose." He reached forward and lifted the outlaw's gun.

Followed by a torrent of abuse from the outraged Mama Jingo, Frank marched the outlaw out of the shack. A night bird whispered from the dark mouth of a nearby smithy's shop and Abe Foster came silently forward, a grin on his leathery face.

Suddenly, as if in a burst of rage, Frank jammed his gun into Slow George Miller's stomach.

"Talk, mister! Where's Jersey Shalott?"

Slow George, hungry and haunted by the tasty meal jerked from his lips, rebelliously turned and then saw something in Twilight's baleful scrutiny that killed his appetite and froze his blood. He wheeled toward that other vague figure in the darkness. Abe Foster lifted a long-barreled six-gun and gazed at it fondly.

Miller's words came in a stuttery ripple of fright:

"Give me a chance to light a shuck, a chance to drift—that's all I want. Adam Leak'll kill me anyway when he's sprung. Shalott's got your cash, Twilight. He's made up a three-thousand-dollar fee for a one-eyed lawyer, Tully Green, from Dillingertown, who promises to spring Leak from jail. Green gets into Four Horse on the noon stage tomorrow. He's

to meet Jersey Shalott after dark tomorrow night for the pay-off at the old wagon yard north of town. It's never used any more and we been hidin' out there."

"George, you coyote," drawled Abe. "It looks like you've done sold your saddle."

"All right!" flared Miller. "So I've squealed on the gang! But it's like I told you. Leak will kill me anyway!"

Frank demanded, "What has this Leak hombre got against you, Miller?"

"After that railroad job we was holed up on the Sagegrouse Hills. I slipped into Broken Bit for a real meal after a week eating jerky and canned tomatoes. Someone spotted me and trailed me. They jumped our hideout. All of us got away but Leak. He swears he'll carve my appetite out of me, once he's freed."

TWILIGHT felt no pity for the hulking outlaw. However, he knew he could not hold him prisoner and have his hands free to deal with Shalott and the conniving Green; nor could he deliver him over to the law without an alarm which would put more important game to flight.

Somewhere, far out on the prairie, a locomotive raised its shrill, trembling whistle note. Frank made his quick decision:

"George, I'm giving you a break. The eastbound rattler will be pullin' down in about two minutes. By morning you can be in Newcastle. If you ever come back —I'll smoke you down before Leak gets to you!"

"Mister, we've made a deal!" breathed the renegade.

Twilight and Foster stood in the darkness beyond the glow from the little depot's bow windows and watched the winking lights of the departing Katy train. Miller, his nose flattened against a window of the accommodation car like a small boy's waved a grateful good-bye.

Frank led the way toward the trail town's shabby hotel. "Maybe that wasn't strictly according to the rules," he said. "But you can't take time to kill woodchucks when you're hunting for bear."

Foster yawned his agreement and nodded toward the hotel's nearly deserted barroom. "I need a drink to git the taste of Slow George out of my mouth," he explained.

The bartender placed a bottle and two shotglasses before them and turned to resume his conversation with another man.

"Rouse me out before sunrise, Dave," the customer was saying. "I wanta hit Raven before noon."

Frank motioned to the barman. "Give the man a drink on me." He eased a friendly grin at the barman's friend and said, "I'm Frank Twilight, of the Anvil spread. I wasn't flapping my ears, but did I hear you say you was riding to Raven?"

"I'm freightin' a sawmill down there by mule," the man replied, after giving Twilight and Foster his keen appraisal. "The outfit's camped halfway there by now. I'll shortcut through and beat 'em to Raven. Have to git a location."

"Maybe you'll be seeing Jesse Humbert, the sheriff there," said Frank. "Maybe you'd give him a message for me. Tell him I've staked out that cow money I need. Tell him I aim to collect it tomorrow, with interest."

The freighter was a prairie-hardened man who could add obtuse signs and make them read logically.

"Can do, friend," he said, and raised his glass.

Frank followed Abe up the stairway at the end of the barroom to the dingy bedroom the Two Chain ramrod had rented earlier in the night.

DAWN was putting its gray wash through the window when Frank awakened. He roused the snoring Abe and poured his half of a pitcher of water on the battered table into the wash basin. Boots pounded on the plank walk below and Frank raised the window, leaning out.

The freighter came out of the hotel

lunchroom, toothpick between his lips; he saw Twilight and raised a friendly hand.

A seedy-looking man in oversize waist overalls came riding in from the north. He entered the supply store across the street.

Frank and Abe were eating giants' breakfasts in the dining-room, opening into the bar, when the unkempt rider entered and purchased three quarts of whiskey. He stuffed them into a flour sack, already half-filled with supplies. Through the street door Frank saw him tie his sack to the pommel of his saddle. The man raked the street with suspicious eyes and rode away, in the direction from which he had come.

The Anvil boss, trailed by the faithful Foster, fashioned their after-breakfast smokes, and ambled over the town. They found themselves in front of the town stable and Frank said, "Those jugheads of ours'll be needing to get the kinks out of their legs. We'll toss our hulls aboard and ride out north. I'd like to look over that old wagon yard."

They circled away from Four Horse, climbing a bench which was studded with spruce and jackpine; and they left their horses on picket, prowling warily afoot for a quarter of a mile to the tableland's edge. Hidden in a cluster of chokeberry and service berry, they peered down over the corrals of the wagon compound.

The smell of woodsmoke was in the air and Frank nudged Abe, pointing toward the smithy's shed at the end of the enclosure. The outlaws had converted it into a cookshack, Frank surmised. Several saddles hung on an improvised kak pole near the door of another long shed which apparently sheltered the desperadoes' horses.

"You figure the thirsty, quart-minded gent was headin' here?" asked Abe, and Frank nodded, saying, "There's five hulls on that kak pole. Jersey Shalott's family has grown since he visited Two Chain —even with Slow George gone."

Abe poked a portion of chewing tobacco into his cheek, inspected his gun and asked softly, "Well, what are we waitin' for?"

Frank answered, "For lawyer Green. No, Abe, I want to get that *dinero* before any gunplay starts. You stand watch here until the noon stage from Dillingertown comes by. If this lawyer Green's riding her he'll probably let Jersey know. I'll wait for you in town."

"Could I be so nosy as to inquire just how you aim to git your claws into that money?" Abe demanded.

Frank grinned provokingly, "I'll be able to tell you better after I see this lawyer gent. Here's hoping his clothes'll fit me." He winked at Abe enigmatically and disappeared into the brush.

THE Anvil boss prepared to kill the remainder of the morning in the hotel's barroom. He took a back table and started a game of solitaire; his play was automatic and his mind dealt another and more fascinating game.

His angular face become soberly thoughtful as he thought of the gamble in which he was engaged; it softened then with the recollection of the warm-eyed girl in the firelight on the prairie. He admitted to himself that the winning of his game with Jersey Shalott would be more exciting because it would give him excuse to see Sue Roman again.

A sharp, high clatter broke into Frank's musing; at first, he could not identify the sound, and as he saw a faint film of interest crossed the bored barman's face he realized it was the pounding of hoofs and the rolling of wheels on a plank bridge at the town's edge.

It was not necessary for him to leave his chair. He could see the Concord stagecoach rock to a halt across the street, dust streams pouring from it like sweat from a weary man's face. Baggage was tossed down from the stage's boot. Two passengers were townsmen who quickly went their separate ways, and a third passenger was a stranger to the town, for he looked about him uncertainly.

He carried a carpetbag and an oilcloth briefcase; his smooth, gaunt face was a lemon-yellow and he wore a black patch over one eye. His shiny black coat, hanging loosely on his ramshackly frame, along with the shoestring tie and flat-crowned hat, gave him a malevolent bearing in the sun-bathed street.

He could be none other than lawyer Tully Green, and Frank shadowed his face over his solitaire game as the attorney-at-law pushed through the batwings and walked to the bar.

"A double, if you please," Green said to the barman. His voice was deep and mellow; and he tossed his long drink, and his words kept flowing as if they had not met the whiskey in their path. "While I am still sober and able, may I ask you about a room for the night?"

The life-weary barman, unimpressed by his unusual customer, tossed a key onto the counter. "Number Seven, upstairs and at the end of the hall," he said.

Green threw a silver dollar onto the bar and disappeared up the stairway, his baggage in hand.

"He was here about a year ago," the barman explained. "He'll come down five times before supper. Two doubles each trip. But he never gets drunk." He shook his head moodily, as if the excellence of his bar had been flaunted.

THE afternoon produced the usual gathering of loafers, and Frank bought into a stud game; it was for small stakes with a good-natured table, and was an excellent means of banking the fires of his impatience.

Abe Foster came strolling in and Frank's glance was a signal which tolled the Two Chain foreman to a chair beside him.

The barkeep's great blot of a shadow passed the table and the card players looked up in surprise to find the bar lamps burning and dusk on the town outside. Frank nudged Abe with a knee. They cashed in their poker chips and Twilight led the way upstairs.

"Spotted Jersey watching the stage," Abe confided softly. "One of the passengers waved to him." Frank nodded and catfooted down the hall.

Inside the door of room number seven, Lawyer Green was singing—his habit, apparently, in moments of drink and deviltry. He looked around in dignified reproach as the door swung open and Twilight smiled down at him over the barrel of his six-gun.

"We've come to do you a favor, Friend Green. You're thinking of going out, later on, to the wagon yards north of town. It's plumb risky. Your fine voice, the night air—and all that. So we're taking your clothes from you to keep you indoors. And I'm running the errand you came here for!"

Tully Green was suddenly very sober. He did not need to know the rest of the story. He merely shrugged and started to remove his coat.

Frank's brittle voice stopped him: "Wait a minute! We'll lift that sleeve hardware first, friend."

Green sighed resignedly as Foster searched him and purloined a deadly looking derringer.

In a few minutes the Dillingertown attorney was clad only in his long, baggy underwear and looked like a wet, discouraged cat caught in a rainstorm.

In Green's briefcase Frank found what he had hoped would be there. It was a letter from Adam Leak, introducing the lawyer to Jersey Shalott.

"Abe, you stay here and keep our guest company." Twilight cocked the lawyer's hat over one ear and buttoned his loose black coat. He made a final adjustment to the black patch over his eye and backed out of the room.

There was pure venom in the shyster's look. In Abe's farewell glance there was the dazed expression of a man for whom events moved too swiftly. . . .

FRANK picketed his cowpony in a clump of aspen and stole toward the wagon compound. The night was pressing heavily down and he realized thankfully that he was merely an unseen

movement in this blackness. A whir of wings went across his face and he caught a quick breath and ducked involuntarily; then an opening door brushed a yellow light across the ground ahead of him and the smithy shop took shape. He unbuttoned his coat, giving ready reach to his gun, and sent a soft whistle across the yard.

Men's voices murmured quickly and died and someone called, "In the yard there—who are you?"

Frank said deeply, "Tully Green. Send Jersey out."

A man cursed and said hoarsely, "Come on in here, you fool It's darker than hell's backyard out there!"

Frank answered coldly, "I'm running this! There's no time to lose and there'll be no lights! Jersey, get out here!"

He moved into the half-glow of the lantern light. A bulky figure was suddenly before him, peering up at his face, and Shalott grunted loudly as a hard hand, holding a piece of letter paper, hit him in the belly.

Shalott took the paper, moving back to the light, and two other men peered over his shoulder as he read it. One of them, Frank remembered, Sue had called Bones Merlin.

"It's him, all right. Leak signed it," Jersey said. He unbuttoned his shirt front and pulled out a packet. "Here's the cash, Green. Three thousand dollars there, as we promised."

Frank replied: "I won't count it. If you've shorted me you lose the pot and the deal."

He turned with the others, feeling an apprehensive chill, as a hard-pushed horse swept through the compound gate and a rider vaulted quickly to the ground.

The newcomer rushed up, knifed one startled look at Frank, and gasped to Jersey:

"I traced Slow George. A couple of guys jumped him at Mama Jingo's. After he'd shot his mouth he caught a rattler out of town! I think it's an Anvil deal!"

Shalott swung one blazing look at Frank, and as if by some unseen signal the lantern light in the blacksmith shop was smashed out.

Frank Twilight ducked aside as fire fanned out of Shalott's six-gun. Frank dived deep into the shadows and his driving feet carried him flatly against a shed.

He collided with a man prowling along the wall and struck downward with his gun-barrel; and he felt the man go down. He whirled, feeling another at his back, and he pistol-whipped the prowler savagely. The outlaw yelled and fired wildly from the ground, and now a volley swung across the yard; and Frank heard Jersey cursing, "Chase him out in the open, you fools!"

Twilight threw a shot toward the voice, but knew he missed, and he sank to one knee, crouching to find a target. At that moment there was a gush of fire from the blacksmith shop and the paper-dry building became a torch, lighting the entire compound. Frank recalled the shattered lantern which had signaled the battle's start.

The steady beat of guns became frantic, as if the outlaws had lost their heads; and the night suddenly ripped apart in an encircling hail of lead from other guns. Powder-flame winked on the slope behind the compound, and a voice, so shrill that it could be only that of Jubilee, screeched, "Hep, Anvil! Hep!"

Another, from the compound's gate, where a duet of .45s were beating a vibrant challenge, yelled: "Throw down your irons, Shalott! It's Sheriff Jesse Humbert speakin'!"

A lightning bolt seemed to come down from the black sky to confound this man-made thunder, and it hit Frank from behind. He looked up from the ground and dimly saw a blocky shape above him and heard the lightning's curses. He fired from the ground and the shape faded away; and when he fainted he was giddily assuring himself that lightning had no sound; that only Jersey Shalott could swear like that. . . .

FACES were swimming against the night sky; faces painted in recognizable lines by flames from the still-burning shed. Frank's head was pillowed in a soft lap and a cool hand was on his brow. It was *not* a dream and it *was* Sue Roman, for he turned his head and a very sharp, very real pain told him where Shalott had slugged him.

He saw Will Roman's anxious face, and Jubilee's and Sam Lavender's, and he heard Sue explain:

"Jesse got your message from the freighter. Dad and I were in Raven when Sheriff Jesse rode out, so we just came along. He found Abe, dismally sober, and a lawyer, very very drunk, at the hotel, and we got here just as the shooting started."

Jubilee joined in: "Sam and me got restless. Hired a neighbor to mind the cows and hit for Four Horse. Come damned nigh shootin' the sheriff when the fun started. We couldn't tell who was fightin' who."

Jesse Humbert bent down and gripped Frank's hand. "Mighty nice goin', son. Jersey won't stand trial. He's dead. Two others are shot up a little. I'm takin' the whole gang, along with Green, to Broken Bit tomorrow to keep Leak company. And I figure there's a nice cut of reward money comin' your way."

"I have my money back for the cows," Frank whispered to Sue. "I can come and pay off that note now. Tell your dad."

Sue blew a straying curl of hair away from the end of her nose. She dropped a wickedly mischievous look into his eyes and quickly looked away.

"I stole that money while you were taking your nap here. I also told Dad we're taking you back to Two Chain and doctoring you up until you're fit to ride again. When that time comes you can have your money and pay for your cows."

Their hands met and clung in the darkness and the Anvil man sighed and chuckled, "I'll be quite a spell mending. Poor Jersey. He didn't know there are different angles to banditry. I've been robbed of that cow money twice. And *this* time I don't mind at all!"

GUNS PAY OFF

(*Continued from page* 31)

second floor. Up on the second floor a voice was talking, shouting. The voice of Cotty Bludge.

Bill Wesco went on tiptoe up the stairs. Below the top, he stopped, listened to what Bludge was saying.

"I saw him kill her, I saw it with my own eyes!" Bludge was shouting. "I saw this kid Wesco do it!"

On the stairs, Bill Wesco froze. Bludge was accusing him of killing the woman he had known as Caroline Sherman!

"I want this woman-killer caught!" Bludge continued. "I'm offering a reward of five thousand dollars for him, dead or alive."

A buzz of voices sounded. Angry voices.

Bludge spoke again, his voice a raucous shout. "And I'd rather pay that reward for his dead carcass than for him alive! The dirty woman killer don't deserve any sympathy from any living human being."

Again the buzz of angry voices swept up.

ON THE stairs, Bill Wesco shivered. If he had turned back, if he had tried to slip away, he would have found the whole town of Dominion, and every miner in the surrounding hills, hunting him as a woman-killer! There would have been no hole deep enough for him to have hidden in, there would have been no horse fast enough to carry him to safety.

If he had fled, Apache trailers would have followed him.

When he was caught—and he certainly would have been caught—he could have expected no mercy except a fast death!

"Bring his carcass in and collect your reward!" Bludge shouted.

At a run, Bill Wesco moved to the top of the stairs. Around the rag-doll body lying on the floor was a group of angry men. More were standing on the front stairs, trying to get close enough to see what had happened. Standing before the front stairs, Bludge had his back to him.

"Why don't you collect your own reward, Cotty?" he said.

Startled faces turned toward him, saw the gun he was holding, jerked out of his way as men scattered like leaves. Bludge whirled to face him. He saw now what he had not seen before—that Bludge had a gun in his hand.

The last person on earth Bludge must have been expecting to see there at the top of the back stairs was Bill Wesco. Bludge was too surprised to take aim. He snatched up the gun in his hand and pulled the trigger—and missed.

In Bill Wesco's hand the gun jumped and jumped. He saw the bullets strike Bludge. "This one's for Joel Burton!" he thought. "And this one is for Ed Langor. And this one is for Russ Holder." The gun jumped again. "And this one is for Rag Doll!"

Bludge was going backward. The stair was behind him. As the last bullet struck him, he began to fall—down the stairs.

He went down with a thunderous crashing and lay sprawled unmoving at the bottom. From the top of the stairs, he looked like another rag doll that had come unjointed.

At the top of the stairs, Bill Wesco reloaded his gun. Not a man was in sight but the hotel, he realized, was still full of armed men who thought he was a woman killer.

"Anybody who wants to believe what Cotty Bludge told you—that I killed this woman—come on out and speak his mind."

There was silence. No one came out. They were still watching, waiting.

Sunny moved beside him. Her clear voice rang through the silent building. "I don't believe it. I know it isn't true."

They waited. The men of Dominion knew Sunny Jones. A voice came: "Is that you, Sunny?"

"It's me," she answered.

"And you don't believe that Wesco killed this woman, like we was told?"

"I don't believe it."

"Then I don't believe it, either," the answer came.

Bill Wesco wiped gray sweat from his face. "Thanks, Sunny, for saving my life," he said. "I would never have got out of here alive, except for you."

BELOW them in the lobby cautious men were appearing. They saw Sunny Jones, saw her standing very close to Bill Wesco, saw the gun she held. If Sunny stood close to a man, then that man had to be all right. On the faces of the watching men, the anger began to disappear.

The front door burst open. Through it limped a ragged, bandaged man. His face was cut and bloody, his clothes were almost torn from him. In his hands he carried a shotgun.

Bill Wesco stared at this man as if he was seeing a ghost. "Ed!" he whispered. "Ed—I thought you were dead!"

Ed Langor looked up the top of the stairs. "It ain't the fault of Billy Caswell and his bunch that I ain't dead," he spoke. "They talked me into lettin' 'em out of the powder house so they could have something to eat, then they slugged me and dropped me down the mine shaft." His angry gaze went around the lobby. "Where to hell is Cotty Bludge? He's the turkey I'm looking for."

His gaze settled on the unjointed rag doll lying at the foot of the stairs. "I see where he is," he said. He looked up. "Good job, Bill. A danged good job."

"But it's not over yet," Bill Wesco answered. "Ed, the 'Kas' we were looking for, he's Billy Caswell. He's still loose, Ed—"

Ed Langor snorted. "Loose, hell!" He patted the stock of the shotgun. "I settled his hash back in the alley a while ago."

"Was that you?" Bill Wesco asked.

"That was me," Ed Langor answered firmly. "It looks like the job is all done. But, Bill—" His gaze came up the stairs again. "What the hell was this all about? Will somebody tell me?"

"I—" Bill began, then stopped. The front door was opening again. A man was coming through it. "There's my dad," Sunny said. "He's looking for me. Quick, Bill, get me out of here. He'll spank me sure, even if I am nineteen."

Sunny Jones, who had come up the back stairs with him, was suddenly a little girl, trying to get away from the wrath of an angry father. Bill caught her arm. "Whoa, Sunny. You're with me, remember. I don't believe even your dad will say anything." He looked down the stairs at Jones.

"If you're looking for somebody, she's right here, with me."

JONES was looking for somebody all right. That fact showed on his face. He found her and started forward. Then he saw Bill Wesco—and stopped. In that moment something happened to Jones, some new fact was driven home to him, some shift in his authority. Slowly the anger went out of his face.

Watching, Bill Wesco almost grinned. "And now, sir, if you will just tell us what is at the bottom of the prospect shaft at the Lucky Devil, we'll all know what the shooting was all about." He was very polite and respectful to this man. "I believe, sir, the present condition of Cotty Bludge releases you from your promise to reveal nothing of the findings in the shaft."

With the muzzle of his gun, he indicated the unjointed rag doll at the bottom of the stairs. Jones looked at that rag doll. He looked around at the waiting men.

"Uh-huh," he said. "I can talk now. It's—copper."

"Copper!" Bill Wesco was a little disappointed. He had expected gold at the very least.

"Yes," Jones answered. "As all of us know, the silver in this area lies in a vein that is found at about the depth of eighty feet at the location of the Renegade and Lucky Devil. That silver, as everybody knows, is playing out. But what nobody does know is that under the silver, at the two hundred foot level, is a vein of copper that will mine out millions of tons of high-grade ore. And copper in that amount is just about as valuable as gold."

Copper! That was what Cotty Bludge had sought. Copper in such quantities as to be as valuable as gold!

Beside him, Bill Wesco was aware of Sunny fidgeting. "Seems to me that I told you once before to go home," he said.

"I know you did!" A grimness crept into Sunny's voice. Again he was telling her to go home!

"I'd now consider it a privilege, Miss Sunny, to *take* you home," he said.

"Oh." Some of the grimness went out of her voice. "All the way!"

"All the way!" he answered firmly.

"That's different!" she answered. All grimness was gone from her voice and she was again an excited girl being taken home by the man she loves.

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HOT-LEAD HARVEST

(*Continued from page 59*)

"What happened to him?" Tad asked.

"He was killed. I saw it. But I also saw him fire first at the man who shot him."

"I'm sorry, Temple."

"It's not your fault, Tad. It was his. I never thought he would come to violence, but his hatred of the settlers seemed to have affected his mind. I think finally he was not—really—sane—any longer." Her voice broke a little on the words.

Tad pressed her hand in sympathy.

"You thought I was all on his side. Actually I had seen it coming on. I just couldn't bring myself to believe it. I was trying to shield myself, too."

"Well, it's over now," Tad said. "The only question now is what are we going to do—you and I?"

"Why not go ahead with our plans?"

"What plans?"

"To get married in October."

Tad opened his eyes and stared at Temple. Her dark eyes, looking down on him tenderly, seemed indescribably beautiful to him now.

He saw that he was lying on a bed at the Diamant ranchhouse.

"But my place—the house."

Temple laughed. "The house'll be there before you are well enough to live in it. The farmers got together after the fight and decided the best way they could pay you back was by—a housing bee! They're down there working now, rebuilding your house and barn better than new."

Tad's battered face suddenly broke into a grin. He put his arm around Temple's waist and drew her close to him.

"A housing bee!" he said. "Can you imagine that!"

GALLOWS BAIT

(*Continued from page 87*)

him from the chair, before two of Judge Stacy's court helpers intervened.

John Brady stood up. If ever a man was swearing without saying words, it was the sanctified John Brady at that moment. His nose was streaming blood. But Brady had not moved. Neither had old Andrew Brady.

You would have thought that old Andrew Brady almost approved the oldest and best son of his house getting punches in the nose.

"Now that we've got order," said Judge Stacy, "I'm askin' if there is further evidence. If there is none, I'm feelin' duty-bound to hold Bud Brady for all of these crimes that have been mentioned. There'll have to be proof of where he was all of the time, and even though John Brady may be unbrotherly, he has suggested something that might be true. Sarah Potter would be loyal enough to Bud Brady to lie for him if necessary—"

A clear, ringing voice came from the back of the room.

"I wouldn't lie for Bud Brady, or any other man!" rang out the words of Sarah Potter. "I don't know what has been said, but Bud had nothing to do with any of this killing and robbing!"

All eyes in the schoolhouse courtroom turned to the door. Sarah Potter, her shapely figure erect, was walking down the aisle. She was carrying a tin box under each arm. Behind her walked Marshal Rudd. Over one arm he had a pair of levis and a blue wool shirt. In his hand he carried a pair of worn riding boots.

Among those who turned to see was John Brady.

He leaped to his feet. A gun came from his side coat pocket.

"Stay away from me!" he cracked out, starting to back toward the side door of the schoolhouse.

It was Bud Brady who made two long, clean jumps over benches, knocking some of the crowd to one side. There was a ripping pain along his side as John Brady's gun exploded. The next shot burned the side of his face, but by this time he had come through with a smashing left hook that fairly lifted John Brady from his feet. The gun smoked again, but the bullet went wild.

Bud twisted the iron from John Brady's hand and calmly smashed his fist into John's face as he backed him against the wall.

"It's all a frameup!" screamed John Brady. "You all know him. I'm a good citizen. You all know what my hellin' brother has been and is. Now he's connived with the Potter gal—"

MARSHAL RUDD was not too smart, but when he knew a thing he never let go of it. His heavy voice rumbled, "It must have tooken some connivin' to stuff some of Bud Brady's clothes into the bottom drawer of the bureau in your room." John Brady lived in a room directly back of his mortgage and loan business office. "An'," went on Marshal Rudd, "it took even more connivin' than that, to git the P & H payroll boxes stuffed into the bed tick. We found 'em or—little Sarah Potter here, found 'em buried in the feathers. It took a longer hunt for the sum of eleven thousand dollars which, I'm opinin', has the gold pieces and foldin' money that Ike Miller can identify among 'em. It's too bad Ed Perkins is dead or, like as not, he could spot the cattle money he paid over to Tod Burnham yesterday. I'm arrestin' John Brady on the charge of murder and robbery!"

"But you can't!" sputtered John Brady. "It's all a trick. Listen, judge, that gal had the stuff and brought it down and planted it in my place."

Tom Potter let out a roaring oath.

Marshal Rudd shook his head. "The trouble with that story, John, is," said the marshal, "that Sarah Potter came directly to me with her father, shortly after daylight this morning. She wa'n't holdin' and she'd no sign o' any o' these things we've tooken from your room."

The good deacon of the church, who liked to pass the collection boxes on Sundays, evidently had found that he could not build himself into a banker fast enough with the small mortgage and loan business he could carry on in Red Gulch county. When he was led away, he was still mumbling that it was all a trick, that he was being framed.

Sarah Potter was in Bud Brady's arms. Nobody seemed to notice how long that kiss lasted, not even old Tom Potter. He and Andrew Brady were glaring at each other for nearly a minute, their faces like two angry goats'. It was Andrew Brady who broke the silence and stuck out his hand.

"Come on, Tom. I'd admire to be buyin' you a drink. If your hadn't been so doggone stubborn forty years ago, we wouldn't have been fightin' about that—" Andrew Brady stopped lamely.

"Yeah, Andy," said Tom Potter, "about that—and I disremembered this many a year what we'd split up over."

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BAD BLOOD

(*Continued from page 97*)

Doll said that years ago. She was right.

"Hoppy, lover, you're all I ever loved," moaned Marie. "I was jealous, you know how I hated her! I hated Bubba, because he was your son, and *her* son. I hated *you* for telling me the truth. But Hoppy, you got to believe there was nothing between me and Carp! I fainted that day and Carp picked me up off the floor. It was my brother, Dusty, that brought you in to see Carp kiss me, wasn't it? It must have been, for he bragged about it afterward! Hoppy, I never blamed you for leaving me, but I wanted you to know the truth about that! I didn't cheat on you! They've kept me locked up, Hoppy, locked away from everyone, but I knew you'd come. Go back to her, Hoppy, to that woman, Doll, to Bubba's mother! Now you know the truth . . . and . . . I'm happy—!"

He put her gently onto the bed, and she was smiling peaceful-like, her poor eyes moving gently in the first little gleam of sunlight. He looked at her a long time, and he came walking out of the room to meet Doll.

He said, "I guess, I sort of suspected, in a way, last night, I wanted Lockjaw to shoot me, for I'd *promised* Carp I'd whip her out of town! Now—!"

Yeah, I've been holding out on you to make the story better. I'd known right along. At least I'd suspected. Doll knew she could never change, so she gave Bubba to Hoppy. There's women like that. She wanted Bubba to have a chance, and what chance would a kid have knowing his mama was—well—a saloonkeeper?

I gulped hard, and I said, "Okay, Bubba. Kiss your mama."

He gulped harder, and he said, "I got a little unfinished business, before I'm fit to do it." He walked past her and right through the house and out the back door. I followed. Doll stayed long enough

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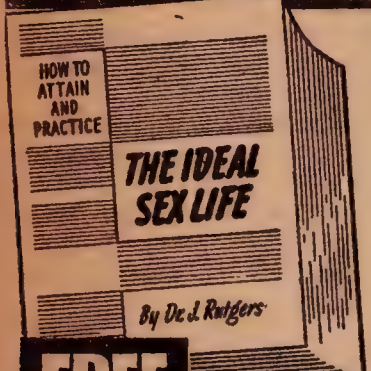

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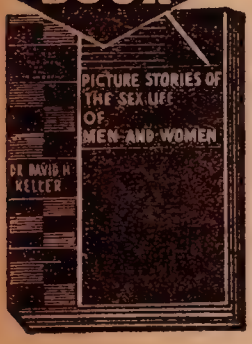

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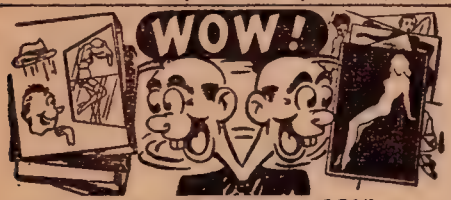

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to close the bedroom door and then came along.

The barn was a smouldering wreck by then and Johnny and Joey Pike were fit to be tied. Joey took one look at Doll and started to reach for his gun. That was before he really saw Bubba. Bubba said, "Keep reaching, mister. This is a showdown." But not Joey Pike! No reaching for the Black Pikes against sudden death like Bubba Mangrum!

DOLL said, "I burned your barn, Pikes. Maybe Bubba will burn your house!" Damnedest thing I ever heard. Me, I was shaking in my boots! She went on, "I think, however, he might listen to reason, providing we check up sometimes in the near future. He wants Hoppy's spread back—but quick!"

Bubba said, "Will somebody please make a move? *Please!*"

Somebody did! A .45 cracked and Bubba spun around and went down. Carp Earnshaw was sitting his horse not twenty yards away, him having rode up unnoticed in the excitement. He blew the smoke away from his gunbarrel. And that was the last move Carp Earnshaw ever made, consciously. For Bubba blew him right out from under his hat—and that's the end of the story!

What's that? Naw, Carp got him through the left shoulder. That was all. Bubba carried the arm in a sling for a while. . . .

The Pikes? Why, that man who just left here was Joey Pike. Bubba Mangrum is slowly but surely taking them over—he's the best cowman in these here parts. He brought his gal up from Sonora and married her and they're living out on the place. I don't understand you when you say it don't make sense. Bubba's taking care of Marie, Bubba and his wife! And—

Naw, the Pikes didn't make no trouble. It was cut and dried. Remember the note they showed around, even to Doll, supposedly from Hoppy in the pen, cutting Bubba off because he'd run out on

him? Sure, now, Doll and me both was a little ashamed to say anything at the time. But poor Hoppy never had much education—you see he couldn't even sign his own name, let alone write a note like that!

Doll? Now if you'll wait until four o'clock you'll see her—by golly, it *is* four! Look! There she comes! Right down the stairs, proud and erect and breath-taking as the feller said—just like always. Mister, women like Doll live forever!

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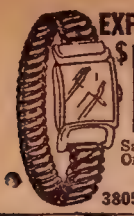

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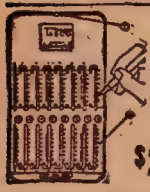

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THE RAMROD'S CORNER

(Continued from page 6)

on the boat, receiving almost twice as much pay as the captain. The pilot had to know the Big Muddy like his own back yard; had to remember the snags and the sandbars and the landmarks along the bank. Then came the railroad, laying its steel across the West and offering faster transportation. Those twin-stacked, floating palaces couldn't stand the competition and they grew fewer, finally fading from the picture."

That was a mighty interesting letter, Amos. Let's have another one sometime.

Now a letter from Clarence Thornton, from down Wichita, Kansas way.

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That's all for this time, amigos, but we'll be back again next issue. So keep those letters coming and we hope you'll all be on hand for the next get-together.

Hasta La Vista.

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Deadman's Hole was just off the old Butterfield Stage route in Southern California, at a point roughly a hundred and ten miles southwest of San Bernardino. The first in a series of murders took place there in 1858, when the savagely battered body of a stage traveler was discovered near the spring where he had gone to drink. He had been strangled by some creature possessed of giant strength —a creature that had left no footprints.

In the following years, numerous others were reported killed in this locality under like conditions of unfathomable mystery. The bodies of some, grotesquely twisted, were found. But many simply disappeared, never to be seen again.

Tales sprang up that a wild apparition, half man and half beast, had been sighted in the vicinity. In the spring of 1876, two Eastern prospectors were in the hills of the neighborhood, intent on following a quartz vein. They had become separated by about half a mile when, suddenly, one of them heard a low whistle. He jerked up his head—and there, seated calmly on a rock a hundred yards or so directly in front of him, was what appeared to be a huge, bear-like animal. As the stunned prospector stood rooted in his tracks, the animal arose and walked toward him. And then he could see that the thing was

human—its powerful body was covered with coarse black hair, but the small head had a definitely human face with, indeed, rather fine features. Overcoming his terror, the prospector shakily leveled his rifle and shouted for his partner. Instantly the creature turned and faded swiftly into the underbrush. The prospectors faded swiftly back East.

In July, 1889, a wealthy and influential sportsman was found murdered at Deadman's Hole in the usual manner: he had been strangled, and the killer had left no footprints. Robbery could not have been the motive, for a valuable watch and a well-stuffed wallet had not been touched. In view of the prominence of the victim, an exhaustive investigation was launched by local and state authorities, but got nowhere.

In December of the same year, the body of an Indian girl was stumbled upon just two hundred yards from the scene of the sportsman's death. Strangled. No footprints.

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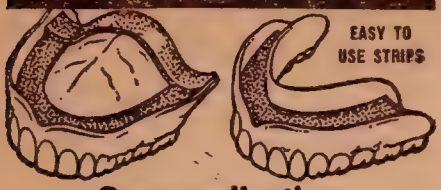

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hunters cautiously approached the fallen monster. It was dead. They turned it over—with effort, for it weighed easily four hundred pounds. It was six feet tall, with long arms, tremendously muscled, its body covered with black hair two to three inches long. The feet were huge—at least twenty inches in length. Its face, upon which grew only a few hairs, had the features of an Indian—but the large, fang-like teeth were those of a flesh-eating animal.

The hunters were convinced that here was a cross between a human being and some animal, probably a bear.

The shaken men went on to a thorough exploration of the rest of the canyon. They came upon a crude dugout. On the floor was a partially devoured carcass of a mountain sheep. There was a pile of weeds and leaves that had been used for a bed. There were no other furnishings or any kind of utensils. In a corner they found a large pile of bones—some of them human. And, hanging from pegs in the walls, were five human skulls. . . .

And so was ripped the veil from the mystery of the murders of Deadman's Hole—but to reveal a deeper enigma. The lurking monster, with feet so large that they left no recognizable prints, had been slain, no longer to turn that lonely, off-trail sector into settings for shadowy death. Yet there remained the riddle of the creature's origin. Whence had it come, this real and tangible incarnation of the kind of nightmarish being that had haunted the whispered folklore of peoples since time began?

HOW THE WEST GOT THOSE BREECHES

By GEORGE DUNN

A ROARING crowd gathered at the dock. Arrival of a ship from around the Horn meant mail day to the citizenry of what was then the shack town, San Francisco. If a man wasn't lucky enough to get a letter, he could at least learn news of home from the passengers. That was in 1850, when the far-flung cry of *California gold* was reaching all ends of the earth.

One passenger, a new arrival of twenty, was singled out by a burly miner. "Where yuh from, friend?" the miner asked. Soil from the diggin's was fresh upon the miner.

"New York," the young tenderfoot replied. He was a man of medium height, rotund. His round face carried a friendly smile and chin whiskers, a fashion of the day.

The miner pointed to the youngster's baggage. "What yuh got there?" he inquired curiously.

"That's my grubstake," the newcomer told him. "Canvas. I'd like to sell it to a tentmaker."

The miner snorted. "Tentmaker, hell!" he exclaimed. "What we need up at the diggin's is pants—*strong* pants!"

"Yes?" The young man thought that over a moment. Then he said, "Lead the way to a tailor."

The young man left a roll of his canvas fabric with the tailor.

"Make some pants out of this for my friend and me," he ordered.

So the tailor made them.

The miner was mighty pleased with his new pants. He strutted around town showing them off. "Look at these," he told the other miners. "I'll be danged if a man ever had pants *this* strong before!"

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"Where'd yuh git 'em?" one of his pards asked.

"From my pal—Levi Strauss!"

"Wal, where in tarnation do we find this Levi Strauss?"

The young New Yorker, Levi Strauss, had hardly got his land legs back before all his canvas was gone—made into work pants, instead of tents.

He then sent a message back to his two brothers in the East, via a sea skipper, to ship more fabrics, especially canvas and duck, for stout work clothes. Meanwhile, Levi journeyed to Sacramento, better to study the clothing needs of the gold seekers. Sacramento was the jump-off to the mines.

By 1853, Levi Strauss was financially able to open his first large-scale factory. He finally adopted denim as the strongest fabric for his waist overalls. The name had its origin in Nimes, France, which was famous for weaving cloth. "Serge de Nimes" was the name they gave it. Next it was shortened to "de Nimes," then to "denim." At first, denim was made in but three colors, light blue, brown and gray. Two pieces were seldom dyed the same shade. Levi Strauss induced the mills to supply him with a new color—indigo blue, in unvarying shade.

IN THE late '60's, Levi was visited by a customer from over Nevada way. He was one Jacob Davis, a tailor of the gold-boom camp, Virginia City. The town got its name in an unusual manner. James Fennimore, of Virginia, called "Ol' Virginy," accidentally stumbled one day and broke the quart bottle of red-eye he was toting. Ruefully, he watched the whiskey spread over the road, sinking into the dust.

But worse still were the hilarious remarks around him about "Ol' Virginy" being unable to stand on his two legs after a few drinks. Calmly, Fennimore picked himself up, brushed the dust from his clothing.

"I done it a-purpose!" he roared. He raised a hand. "I hereby christen this here camp Virginia City!"

And the name stuck.

While purchasing fabrics from Levi Strauss, Jake Davis related an incident concerning one of his customers over in Virginia City. The customer was known as Alkali Ike. Alkali Ike was a prospector.

He always packed rock specimens, mining tools, whiskey flasks, and all his worldly goods in his pants pockets. Alkali was a cockleburr in Jake Davis's undershirt. The prospector's periodical visits to Virginia City always meant a bad day for Jake.

"Gol-darn it!" Alkali Ike would snarl, stamping into Jake's shop. "Good-fer-nothin' tailors! Why in purgatory cain't yuh sew up these gosh-blamed pants pockets so's the consarned dad-blamed things won't rip?"

Jake Davis got pretty tired of this. Alkali left his pants with Davis. It is hoped Alkali put on another pair, but, anyway, he went out to make the rounds of Virginia City saloons. Davis decided he'd fix Ike once and for all.

He took the pants to a local harness-maker and had the seams reinforced with copper harness rivets.

When Ike returned, he was in no condition to see the pants, much less the copper rivets. On Alkali's next trip to town, Davis was prepared for Ike's usual outburst. But this time the prospector was grinning with satisfaction.

"Looky here, Jake!" he beamed. "These here pockets ain't got a single rip in 'em. They're just as good as new!"

Levi Strauss listened to Davis's story with interest. "You know that has possibilities," he said meditatively. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll invest my own capital, and we'll see if we can't get you a patent on that rivet idea."

The result was that the patent was granted in 1873 for seventeen years. After that it was renewed for another seventeen years. And Levi Strauss placed Jake Davis in charge of his overall factory.

With the exception of one improvement, Levis have remained pretty

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much the same since the copper rivet was added. A couple of Levi men went hunting. One of them bagged a bobcat.

"Look at those claws," one of the hunters remarked. "Concealed, so a man wouldn't even know they were there."

A lot of good ideas have been cooked up around a campfire. These hunters returned to San Francisco with the idea that the back rivets on Levis should be concealed—so not to scratch furniture or fine saddles.

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"Levi Strauss," said Doc. "Been makin' my clothes fer nigh onto forty year!"

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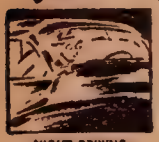
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State of New York }
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Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Frank Armer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Fighting Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1 That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Frank Armer,
125 East 46th Street, New York City.
Editor, Adolphe Barreaux,
125 East 46th Street, New York City.
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